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Pythons and their ways.

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P Y T H O N S
AND THEIR WAYS

THE *Cape Argus* says: "Mr FitzSimons is certainly the most readable writer on natural history subjects in South Africa. He is the Fabre of South Africa in his simple style of writing and his patient observation."



PERFORMING A SURGICAL OPERATION ON A PYTHON IN THE SNAKE
HOSPITAL AT THE SNAKE PARK

Fr.

PYTHONS AND THEIR WAYS

BY

F. W. FITZSIMONS

DIRECTOR OF THE ~~PORT~~ ELIZABETH MUSEUM



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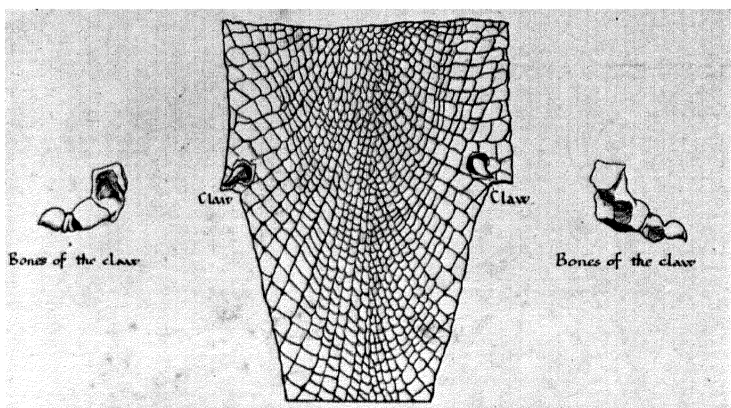
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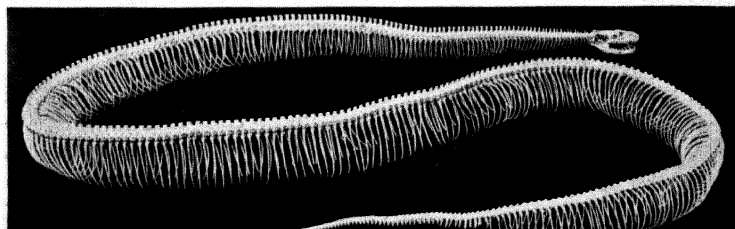
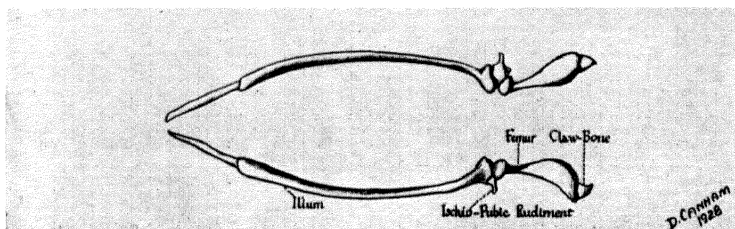
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The remote ancestors of snakes were lizard-like creatures with limbs.

This illustration shows the rudimentary hind limbs... of the South African Python.



1. RUDIMENTARY HIND LIMBS OF THE SOUTH AFRICAN PYTHON
2. SKELETON OF A 16-FOOT PYTHON IN THE PORT ELIZABETH MUSEUM

PYTHONS AND THEIR WAYS

CHAPTER I

THE PYTHON TRIBE

Be ye therefore wise as serpents.

Matthew vii, 20

PYTHONS are to be found nearly everywhere in the world where the sun is sufficiently warm for their comfort : in South-eastern Europe, Central and South Asia, Africa, Australasia, South and Central America, Western North America, and the West Indies.

The species best known in Africa is the Rock Python (*Python sebae*). It is pale brown above, with darker brown, black-edged, more or less sinuous cross-bars, usually connected by a dark stripe, sometimes continuous and sometimes interrupted, running along either side of the back. The sides have large spots, and are finely dotted with black. On the top of the head there is a triangular dark brown blotch, bordered by a light stripe beginning at the end of the snout, above the nostril, and ending above the eye. On either side of the head is a dark stripe with a

PYTHONS AND THEIR WAYS

dark sub-triangular blotch below the eye. The upper surface has a large stripe between two black ones. The belly is spotted, and dotted with dark brown.

The average total length of the Rock Python is sixteen feet. But it attains a length of at least twenty feet, and sometimes twenty-three and twenty-five. We obtain many specimens every year for our Snake Park, but rarely any over fifteen feet in total length. Occasionally skins are sent to us from wild, outlying districts where Nature's vandal, Man, rarely penetrates. These are sometimes eighteen feet long.

As it inhabits the whole of Southern Africa with the exception of the Cape Province and the desert-like, arid regions such as the western portions of Bechuanaland and the Kalahari, it may be classed as the typical python of the African continent. Almost everywhere, including both East and West Tropical Africa, we have abundant evidence of its presence where there is suitable environment in the form of water, bush-covered lands, and natural prey. It is more plentiful in the fertile east and central parts, where conditions are suitable for its existence, than in the west. We have many records of its

THE PYTHON TRIBE

presence along the Gold Coast as far north as Senegal.

Unfortunately, owing to its sluggish habits and its total inability to conceal itself effectively, and to the spreading of the human race over its haunts, with consequent demolition of the tangled scrub, rushes, reeds, and long grass, the great majority, if not all, of the old and exceptionally large specimens have been slain. And those coming on seldom, if ever, get a chance to live out the natural span of their lives.

Pythons have been known to live in captivity for twenty-five years; but the extreme age to which it is possible for them to attain has never been ascertained.

Pythons carry about with them evidence of their descent from a race of huge lizards, or lizard-like creatures, with legs. The rudimentary bones of the hind legs, used in progression by their remote ancestors, will be found, on dissection, embedded in the flesh toward the tail end of the snake. But, though part of the pelvic bones still remains in the body, the only outward signs of these legs are the claw-like spurs projecting from the skin.

PYTHONS AND THEIR WAYS

They mate in the autumn. And their dormant season (winter-time) supervenes before another batch of eggs is produced in South Africa's mid-summer.

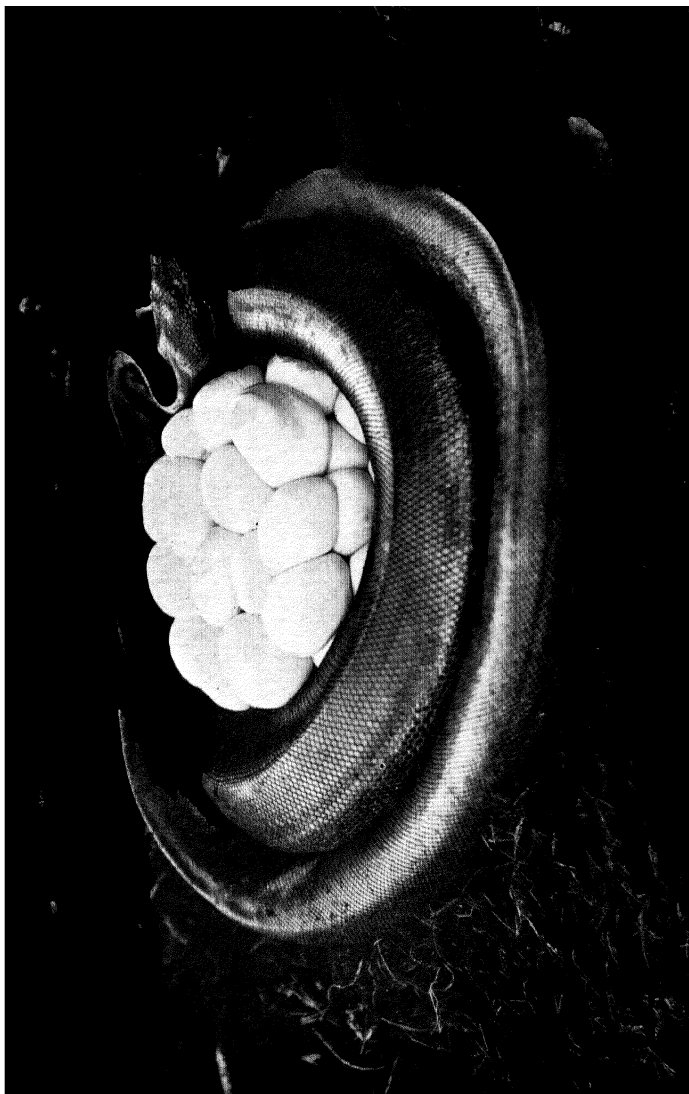
The number of eggs varies according to the size of the snake. Twenty-three is the smallest number produced by one of our captive pythons, sixty-nine the maximum. The following record provides some instances :

Python 11 feet in length laid 23 eggs.

„	11 $\frac{3}{4}$	„	„	31	„
„	12 $\frac{1}{2}$	„	„	29	„
„	13	„	„	38	„
„	13 $\frac{1}{4}$	„	„	44	„
„	14 $\frac{1}{2}$	„	„	54	„
„	15	„	„	51	„
„	15	„	„	62	„
„	15 $\frac{1}{4}$	„	„	58	„
„	16	„	„	57	„
„	17	„	„	69	„

The eggs vary from five to five and a half ounces in weight ; the shells are soft, tough, leathery, and in colour ivory white. There is no distinct yolk and transparent albumen as in the eggs of birds ; the whole is of a yellow tint.

In some species the eggs, when laid, are in the early stage of incubation—the very young,



A PYTHON AND HER EGGS

After producing her eggs the mother python coiled her body round them in the form of a cone, with her head resting on top, so that the eggs were invisible. When we approached she partly uncoiled and remained on the defensive.

THE PYTHON TRIBE

pulsating embryo being plainly visible when the egg is opened. The African Python's eggs are usually, but not always, quite fresh when produced.

Out in the wild, pythons deposit their eggs in a variety of places. The deserted hole of an ant-eater, or aard-vark, is a favourite nest. So is any other kind of hole or cavity in the rocks sufficiently large, or the hollow trunk of a tree. Other favoured egg-nests are the cavities among the roots of large trees growing out of a tangled mass of undergrowth; among dead leaves amid dense scrub; under tufts of long, rank grass; in sugar-cane plantations; in the midst of rushes bordering streams.

Our captive pythons have often laid great batches of eggs, mostly during December and January, though we had one instance of a python laying a pile of fully developed eggs in October, and another of a similar delivery in November.

In the wild state the mother snake lies coiled round her eggs for the twofold purpose of protecting them from the many enemies—or other creatures of the wild—who would eat them, and of aiding them in the process of incubation. At

PYTHONS AND THEIR WAYS

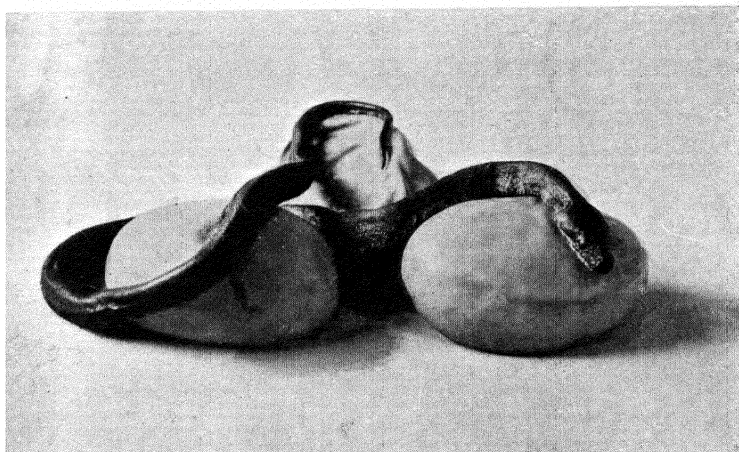
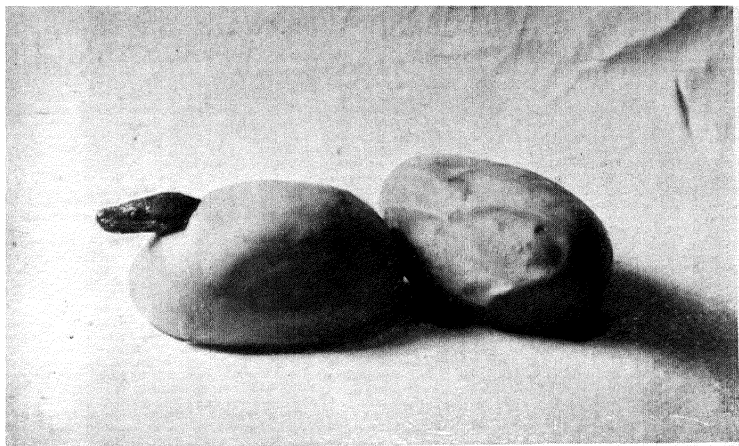
this period her blood rises to a temperature of 90° Fahrenheit, which is, apparently, Nature's rule for the hatching of infant pythons.

Among our captives the parent sometimes remains coiled round the eggs for several days after laying them; but we have never noticed any keen desire on her part to protect or continue to incubate them. This may be due to the strange environment, and to the nervousness and shyness contingent upon captivity.

On one occasion a python threw her coils around her pile of eggs and remained thus, immovable, until disturbed by some of her fellow-captives in the cage. Thereupon she uncoiled herself, moved away, and took no further notice of her eggs.

When the young ones hatch out the mother shows that she considers her maternal duties at an end by taking no heed of them. The babes scatter in all directions in the instinctive desire for food—at this period consisting of such small prey as mice, rats, birds, lizards, and frogs. They would probably hatch out equally well if the mother did not coil about them, as other young reptiles do. But the python knows that if she does not guard her eggs very few will survive,

16



1. A BABY PYTHON'S FIRST GLIMPS OF TERRESTRIAL LIFE
2. RESTING AFTER A HARD STRUGGLE TO GET OUT OF
THE SHELL

THE PYTHON TRIBE

so many are the creatures on the look-out for these titbits. Chief among these enemies are the large monitor lizard, the mongoose, the jackal, and the rat.

A pair of African Pythons once mated in the London Zoo in the month of June. The female laid close upon a hundred eggs in the following January, and incubated them until April, when the embryos were found to be still immature. This retarded incubation was undoubtedly due to the unnatural conditions, for the eggs should not have taken longer than between two and three months to hatch.

The following account of a python incubating her eggs is taken from Harmsworth's *Natural History* :

It had long been reported in India that pythons incubated their large spherical eggs—which may be compared in size to lawn-tennis balls. Such reports were received incredulously until their truth was established in 1841, when a female African python, in the Jardin des Plantes, Paris, laid fifteen eggs on 6th May, and proceeded to incubate them. When first laid, the eggs, which were completely separate, were soft, oval, and ashy-grey ; they soon assumed a rounder form and clearer tint, at the same time hardening. The parent collected them into a cone-shaped pile, and coiled herself round it in such a way

PYTHONS AND THEIR WAYS

as to completely conceal the whole number, her head forming the summit of the cone.

For upward of fifty-six days this position was maintained without movement, excepting when anyone attempted to touch the eggs. On 2nd July one of the eggs split, revealing a fully formed baby python within; next day the little reptile came forth into the world. During the four succeeding days eight more made their appearance; but the rest of the eggs were spoiled. In from ten to fourteen days the young pythons changed their skins; after this they caught and devoured some live sparrows—seizing and smothering them in the way in which larger pythons destroy larger prey. A second instance of a python brooding its eggs has been observed since.

After capture pythons usually become sullen and sluggish, and seldom show a disposition to attack anyone entering the cage. When it is necessary to handle a large one the keeper approaches, blanket over arm. Should the reptile make a sudden lunge with gaping jaws, he thrusts the blanket at him, and receives the blow on it.

One of our keepers was a careless fellow, very self-confident. Despite advice, he entered the python cage with his shirt sleeves rolled up to the elbow, and boldly strode toward a big python with the intention of gripping it by the neck.

All we saw was a red and white flash, before



1. FORCIBLY FEEDING PYTHONS WITH RAW BEEF
2. SYRINGING EGG-FLIP DOWN A PYTHON'S THROAT

THE PYTHON TRIBE

the gaping jaws of the python closed, hard and strong, over the man's forearm. Simultaneously three coils were thrown round his right leg, and he was battling for life. Only too well he knew that if the snake succeeded in getting a coil round his chest his ribs would be crushed, and the splintered ends would pierce heart and lungs like so many sharp daggers.

To save the man we were obliged to sever the python's backbone at the neck. It was done greatly to my regret, for I valued the python far more than I did the conceited fool of a man whose own idiocy had caused the trouble.

Captive pythons frequently show their resentment by going on hunger-strike, and, even in the presence of their natural prey, will keep it up for weeks—even for months. Sometimes, indeed, they will actually die of starvation in the presence of animals suitable for their food. Again, after a fast of several months, a python will suddenly awake to the fact that he is hungry and begin to feed. Once the hunger-strike is broken the python will not, as a rule, revert to it.

Artificial feeding does not usually prolong their lives very much. When the python is forcibly fed, the gastric juices do not flow abundantly

PYTHONS AND THEIR WAYS

enough to digest the food, which, if not disgorged, decomposes and poisons the reptile. Egg flip is often used ; if retained it nourishes the python more or less. The method of feeding is to fill a cattle-enema syringe with the flip, push the nozzle down into the throat, and squirt the contents into the stomach, helping the process by gentle massage. Another plan is to push lumps of beef down the gullet with a ramrod and work them down with the fingers. Pythons frequently disgorge after being forcibly fed ; to counter this we tie a ligature between the stomach and the throat and leave it on for about twelve hours.

After much observation I have concluded that snakes are largely influenced in their choice of food by colour. They will always prefer grey rabbits to white or parti-coloured ones. Pythons and other species of snakes invariably avoid white rats ; and if wild normal-coloured rats are put into the cage with white ones, the grey are eaten and the whites left. Poultry, too, which resemble wild birds in colour (such as partridge, pheasant, wild duck, guinea-fowl) are more readily taken than others.

One night, when on a visit to a Boer friend, we were awakened by a commotion in the fowl-

THE PYTHON TRIBE

run. A cock was calling for help with all the power of his lungs, and the hens were cackling like mad.

The cause of the commotion was a hungry python. Alas ! my friend slew it before I could prevent him, much to my sorrow. For a python is a thing of beauty, but a fowl is like most of man's handiwork, it is a blot on the fair face of the earth.

On three occasions natives who slew pythons at buck hunts found Cape Duiker bucks in fresh condition entombed in the stomachs. They removed the bodies, washed, and ate them. The Kafir has a good healthy appetite, and his power of digestion is the envy of every weak-stomached, liverish, whisky-drinking white man.

I once saw a strange fight between two pythons. One, nine feet long, had constricted a rabbit when, a moment later, another python, twice the size of the first, seized the prey and, in doing so, threw its coils round the other snake as well. The two remained in a tight embrace for half an hour, when the larger snake at last relaxed ; the smaller one was so badly injured that it died during the night.

Pythons prefer bush-covered, rocky valleys and

PYTHONS AND THEIR WAYS

hillsides, or bush-veld and the scrub-covered margins of streams. As they love to submerge in water they are invariably found in its vicinity.

Another reason for their partiality to well-watered localities is that the birds and animals which are their natural food are more abundant in these localities than in the open, dry, rocky and sandy hill-sides, gorges, and veld so common in the central and western parts of South Africa.

Lying motionless as a stone, the python patiently awaits the approach of an animal or bird within striking distance. Then, with wide-gaping mouth, like an arrow discharged from a bow, it makes its thrust. The instant the jaws close upon the victim, those deadly coils come into operation and the prey is secure in the embrace of one or more folds of the python's sinuous body. The stroke and enfoldment are so rapid that the human eye cannot register the separate movements. The initial lunge is seen; then a blurred vision of moving coils. A half-stifled scream startles the watcher; and there, motionless, lies the python waiting until its victim is quite dead.

The number of coils brought into action de-

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pende entirely upon the size of the python and its prey. A python of about twelve feet in length, in constricting a guinea-pig, uses one coil. A rabbit or fowl is sometimes killed with one, but more often two. The python's object is to crush the body so effectually that the lungs are unable to expand, and death follows quickly from asphyxiation. When constricting an animal the size of a Duiker buck a large python exerts its full strength, and as many as five coils are often employed in the crushing process.

When the python is sufficiently large to constrict its victim efficiently, the prey suffers little or no pain. The unsuspecting creature is seized in the great jaws by their formidable armature of recurved teeth and, almost on the instant, its ribs and lungs are crushed in, death being practically instantaneous.

It is remarkable, yet perfectly true, that domesticated creatures do not show the slightest fear when introduced into a cage containing pythons. After the first few minutes of surprise, and sometimes of alarm or inquisitiveness at their new and strange surroundings, they pay no heed to the huge reptiles sluggishly moving about or lying dormant in the cage. Apart from getting out of

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the way of the snakes when they happen to move, the sacrificial animals pay them no heed. Guinea-pigs, rabbits, fowls will feed, calm and serene, with not the slightest sign of concern, within a foot of pythons. At night, as likely as not, the fowls will roost on a snake's coiled-up body; and the guinea-pigs, if alarmed by the bark of a dog, or the sudden appearance of a stranger, will seek sanctuary behind a coiled python or within the hollow space ringed by the coils.

The eyesight of the great majority of animals is so contrived that it detects instantly anything that moves. But a living creature that is fairly well camouflaged they will not see, so long as it is immovable, though they may detect it by its odour. This is why so many creatures, from insects upward, resort to immobility to escape their enemies. But the merest flick of an ear, tail, or feather will at once be noticed.

We are apt to judge the feelings of an animal by what our own would be in similar circumstances. But most of our suffering is mental, and animals are devoid of imagination such as the more advanced and cultured of the human race possess. An animal does not anticipate pain and suffering; and though it takes precautions against surprise

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attacks by its known natural enemies, it does not suffer mentally at all from fear and dread.

When a captive python desires to feed, it sometimes makes a sudden lunge, seizes its prey, and instantly constricts it. At other times the victim is stalked after the manner frequently employed out in the wild.

The spectacle of a python stalking a guinea-pig, rabbit, or fowl is a truly horrifying sight to those unaccustomed to it. The python is lying apparently dormant. There is no movement of its body, not even the wink of an eyelid, only the flickering of a forked tongue, to betray the fact that it is alive.

Then the head begins to move. Slowly it rises. If the intended prey shows the slightest uneasiness it remains motionless. But if it takes no notice, the snake, with head poised about a foot from the ground, now begins the serious business of stalking. With slow but continuous movement the head is advanced toward its objective.

Unless the watcher keeps his eyes fixed intently on the snake he cannot be sure that he actually sees this movement of the head and anterior portion of the reptile's body. The guinea-pig,

PYTHONS AND THEIR WAYS

rabbit, or fowl certainly does not. Or, if it does, it takes no notice.

But, like the slow movement of a sluggish stream, the snake's head is advancing, its sinister, unwinking, lidless eyes fixed and intent. Then . . . a forward thrust, too rapid for human eye to register . . . a smothered cry . . . and all is over.

Motionless lies the snake. There, as securely and tightly in its grip as a canary in the closed fist of a strong man, is the prey. There is no cruelty in the process. The victim is as unaware of its impending end as is a buck stalked by a man and shot through heart or brain.

One day the attendant at the Snake Park introduced a dozen rats into the cage containing a python twelve feet in length. The following morning the rats were lying in a bunch asleep, and the rounded appearance of their stomachs indicated that they had been feeding generously.

On being handled the python appeared to be unusually sluggish, and it was disinclined to crawl about when prodded. During the night the rats had fed freely on the reptile's blood, the procedure being to bite the creature with the sharp canine teeth and lap up the blood which oozed from the punctures. The python died two days

THE PYTHON TRIBE

later. The skin was removed and the flesh examined. Sixty-nine wounds from the teeth of the rats were counted. The python was not sick or otherwise incapable of defending itself against the rats. On the contrary, one bite from its well-armed jaws would have killed a rat. The season was summer-time and the temperature of the air in the cage was about 75°.

On another occasion I had a python in captivity in Natal. It was confined in a spacious cage and allowed out for exercise three times weekly. At these times, however, a muscular son of Ham kept watch and ward over it. The python went on hunger-strike and refused to be tempted even by its most favourite food in the shape of cane rats, hares, guinea-pigs, or fowls. Artificial feeding was tried, but being a busy person I hadn't the time to do the job myself, and Kafirs are apt to be clumsy and rough. The mouth would get injured and canker always developed, which is a streptococci infection requiring much treatment for its cure. One day a big barn rat was put into its cage. It heeded the python not at all, and when alarmed by the approach of a dog or a person it hid within the coils of the python or behind its body, the coils being one on top of

PYTHONS AND THEIR WAYS

another, forming a cavity within. This was the rat's favourite hiding-place, and much amusement was given to onlookers by its habit of popping in and out. It lived in peace and harmony with the python for three weeks, until one morning my Zulu boy requested me to come and see the python. The rat, during the night, had fed off the flesh of the snake where it was softest and most juicy, viz., between the ridge of the backbone and the top of the ribs. For nine inches along the backbone the flesh had been eaten, leaving a long white seam half an inch in breadth. It was summer and the temperature of the air was at least 80° Fahrenheit, yet the snake, which was seventeen feet odd in length, allowed the rat to make a hearty meal. The wound healed perfectly, and the python doggedly kept to its fast. Fowls and guinea-pigs tempted it not at all, but I hoped that sooner or later it would give up its foolish hunger-strike. When once a python can be induced to eat in captivity there is no more trouble with it, at least in regard to taking food. Two years went by, and nothing stronger than water was swallowed. Yet the reptile was not in an emaciated condition.

Two more months fled, and I was about to make

THE PYTHON TRIBE

arrangements for taking the python out to the nearest kloof and releasing it, but it forestalled my good intentions by escaping.

Snakes do not possess the same sensibility to pain as is usual in the higher or warm-blooded animals. But what degree of pain a snake experiences it is difficult to determine. Pain is indicated in ways with which we are all familiar, and there is no mistaking its manifestations. At the Snake Park there is a large room which is electrically heated. Here the pythons are put to bed each evening. The floor is covered with warm, woollen blankets and hay, and the temperature of the air is that of the pythons' native haunts in midsummer.

One day thirty-five striped field rats were released in the python house. As was usual, they took no notice of the snakes and fed and gambolled about freely among them. Three mornings later four pythons were discovered dead, and an examination revealed the presence of numerous small cavities in their bodies where the rats had dined.

This tragedy occurred during the warmest season of the year, and cannot be explained except on the supposition that the snakes did not experience any real pain, else they would never have

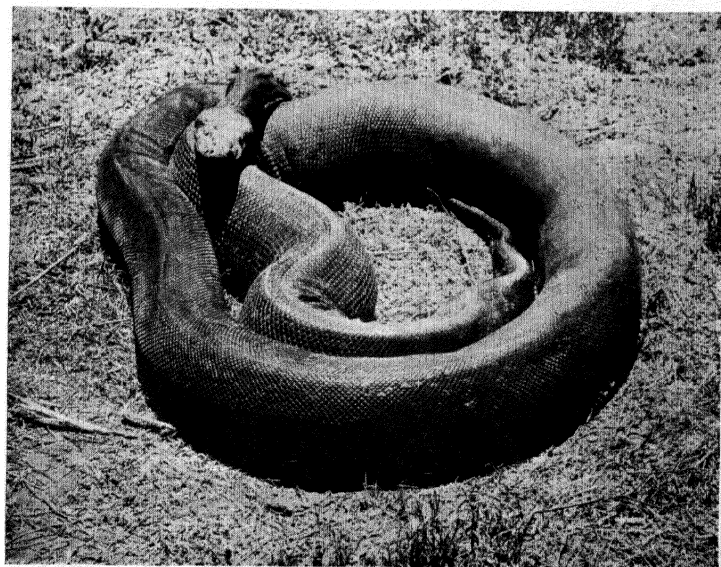
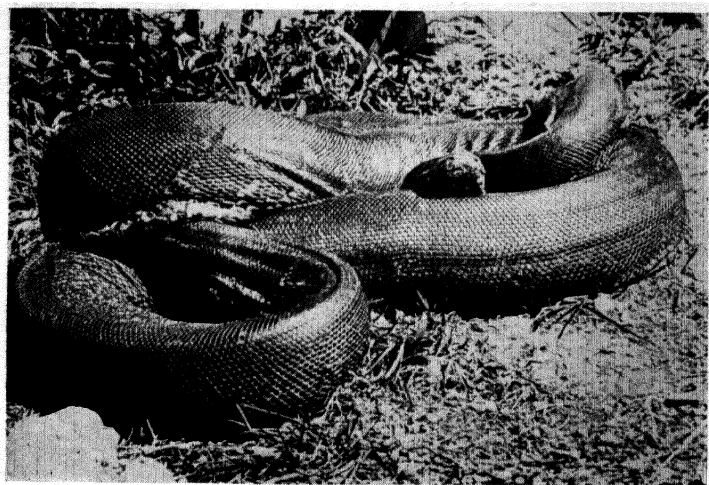
PYTHONS AND THEIR WAYS

allowed this small species of rat deliberately to have eaten pieces out of them.

Another instance of this lack of sensibility to pain came under my observation. Some large logs of wood had been placed in the python enclosure. A barn rat had been hiding in a cavity in one of the logs, and the assistant, thinking one of the pythons would soon dispose of it, did not trouble to attempt its capture or destruction.

One morning I turned the corner of one of the pillars and glanced into the python enclosure. There, perched on a python's back, was the rat, deliberately feeding on the reptile's flesh. After the lapse of a few minutes the python calmly disentangled its head and anterior part of its body from a pile consisting of some fifteen of its brothers.

Then slowly and deliberately it brought its nose up to the rat and investigated it. Instead of making a snap and ending the life of the rodent, it merely pushed the voracious creature away. But the rat heeded not the interruption to its meal. It began in another place, and again, and yet again, the python dislodged it. Then, paying no further heed to the rat, the python shoved its head among the coils of its fellows and allowed the unwelcome diner to continue feeding.



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There was no sign of shrinking or wincing or indeed any other indication that the python felt any degree of pain; and yet this happened during the season when snakes are unusually active.

The python enclosure at the Snake Park contains many kinds of creatures. During the warm season of the year there are upward of thirty pythons in it. Among these, living usually in harmony, are two species of lizards of large size. One of them is the Water Monitor, known also as the Leguaan and Iguana; it attains a length of over five feet. The other is the Rock Monitor; this is more squat and shorter than its cousin. Sometimes these big lizards attack a python and have to be beaten off by an attendant with a stick, for the pythons invariably allow themselves to be worried and gnawed without displaying resentment.

But one day a big, strong Water Monitor grabbed a python by the neck. The teeth of these lizards are strong but blunt, so although it had apparently been trying for some time to tear the skin of the python, it had not succeeded in so doing. The python, however, wearied at length of the lizard's attentions and, throwing three coils

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round its body, crushed it to death and forthwith swallowed it.

Those who cavil at feeding pythons on living prey should pause to consider what they themselves do, or cause to be done. They rear animals for the one and only purpose of killing and eating them. And the killing is invariably more or less painful and prolonged ; not because we desire to inflict pain and torture, but because our methods are not so efficient as those of the lower animals, whose powers in this respect have been perfected by the slow, but sure, processes of nature.

Pythons, when hunting, often submerge in a pool of water wherein animals and large birds are accustomed to slake their thirst. At first sign of the intended prey the python withdraws its nostrils from above water, and, lying still, very still, at the bottom of the pool, awaits its chance. Five—ten—fifteen minutes and more may go by, yet it requires no fresh air to keep alive the sluggish fires of its body.

Then, like an arrow from the bow, the reptile makes its lunge, to secure a strong grip with its teeth. It matters not what part of the body is seized. The coils come into operation with such

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lightning speed that the victim has no time to struggle.

I once saw a python grip and overpower a Duiker buck in this way. The buck stepped into the shallows of the little pool of crystal-clear water. On the instant the submerged python gripped it by a foreleg. A piteous bleat; the lashing of the previously still water to white foam; and there, half in, half out of the water, lay the great python with the buck in its coils.

When the prey is too large to be swallowed whole, it is crushed so effectively that it is converted into a polony-shaped mass, to make the swallowing easier.

During deglutition the salivary glands are very active, and an abundance of saliva is secreted to enable the snake to swallow its prey with comparative ease. But the popular belief that snakes 'slime' their prey before swallowing it is quite erroneous. The saliva comes into contact only with that portion of the prey which is within the mouth. Sometimes a little saliva may escape from the sides of the mouth. The custom of snakes to disgorge when alarmed or irritated may have given rise to the idea, for the ejected body of the victim is of course covered with the slimy

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secretion it took on automatically while in the digestive tract.

Pythons are good climbers. They twist in and out among the branches of trees, but not, as is so often believed, by coiling themselves, spiral fashion, round the branches, as a rope is twisted, strand upon strand, round the trunk of a tree or a pole. No species of snake climbs like that.

Lying along the branch of a tree, a python will remain immovable for hours, its unwinking, lidless eyes concentrated on the ground below in the hope that some prey will pass within range of a drop grip.

Pythons are not venomous, being entirely devoid of any poison apparatus. The teeth are all solid, without any sign of grooving. The lower jaw is armed with one row, the upper with two, of sharp teeth, curved backward toward the throat for better retention of the prey. These teeth are capable of inflicting very nasty wounds, which, if not carefully sterilized with some good disinfectant, are apt to fester.

During a lecturing tour I met a farmer who had, some years earlier, tried to capture a python. It had seized his right hand in its jaws and held on so tenaciously that the head had to be severed

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before the jaws could be disengaged. Nothing was done to the wound beyond washing it with water and applying a bandage. Suppuration followed, and before the wound healed the hand was crippled permanently.

(Bites of any animal whose diet is of flesh do not, as a rule, heal by first intention unless thoroughly sterilized, because pus-forming bacteria thrive in the mouths of such creatures.)

A python will put up a strenuous fight if attacked, and resist vigorously until overcome. Our usual way of capturing large specimens is to approach the reptile with a blanket or net held out, a procedure similar to that adopted by the matador toward the bull. The python is encouraged to bite at the blanket; when it does, its head is enveloped instantly. The head is then seized by one man, the tail by another; and the creature's struggles are overcome after longer or shorter efforts according to the size and strength of the reptile. Sometimes the assistance of several men is required, some to sit on the body of the snake, gripping it tight, until it ceases to struggle. The attackers do not always escape unscathed from these encounters.

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Despite their huge bulk and immense power of constriction, pythons are inoffensive creatures, and, if left unmolested, will rarely, or never, attack human beings. There is no authenticated instance of a python in South Africa ever having deliberately attacked man, woman, or child without molestation, real or fancied.

I once saw a python constrict a Zulu. But the occurrence was in the nature of an accident, or rather it was misjudgment on the python's part.

We were at a buck hunt. One of the natives stumbled on a python in the undergrowth ; next instant the air was rent with piteous cries in the melodious Zulu tongue. We hastened to the rescue, expecting to find that the man had been bitten by a mamba. Instead, it was a lusty young python pitting its strength against that of the Zulu. It was hauled off, and the only harm done was a temporarily crippled condition of one of the man's legs and a ragged wound in his shoulder.

One day, when fooling about in a dense patch of bush, one of our dogs disturbed a bulky python, which broke cover and fled down the slope to the adjacent Umgeni river. An Indian coolie was peacefully passing the time away on

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the bank, watching the cork of his fishing-line in the hope that it would start bobbing. Down rushed the python, heading for the safety afforded by the water. He was within ten feet of the coolie when the man glanced round. From a sitting position he sprang, with a single leap, like a frog, into the water, the python on top of him.

We flew after, and hauled the terrified and half-drowned man out of the water. For the next half-hour all he was capable of doing was to beat a tattoo on his breast and cry, over and over again, something in the Hindu language which sounded like "*Mio ma*," while tears streamed from his eyes. Indians are excitable people, and I have often seen them go to pieces, in a nervous sense, in a similar way.

The fat of the python, which lies within the body in little lumps joined together by connective tissue, is credited with having wonderful virtues in the cure of certain diseases. In reality it is no more valuable than the fat of any other creature. But many a time, when wet and hungry, we have bartered it at the native kraals for fowls, mealies, Kafir beer, or milk.

When healthy and in good condition the python often casts its skin entire after the fashion of

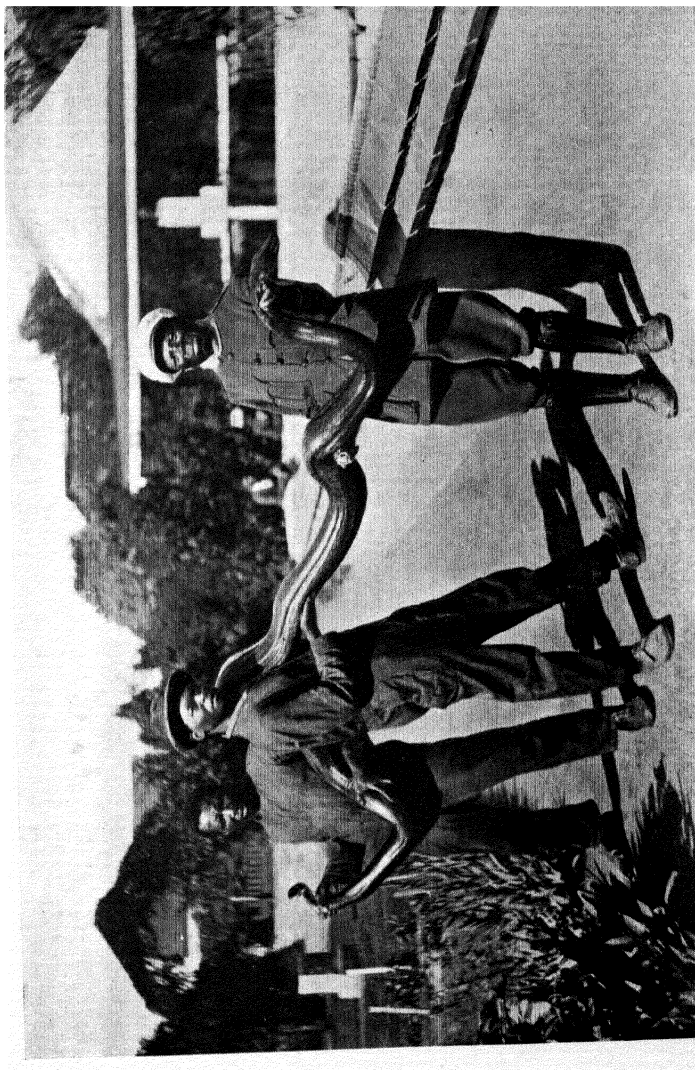
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other species of snakes. A captive python, fifteen feet long, once cast its complete skin in the month of February. I have seen this on several occasions.

As a rule, captive pythons shed their skin in sections, and, to save their lives, they have then to be soaked for hours in warm water and have the skin gently rubbed, or peeled off, to prevent it from sticking to the new epidermis and thus killing the snake. After the old skin is shed the new one possesses a beautiful purplish sheen, changing in shade with every movement of the sinuous body. The skin is sometimes shed twice in a season, but usually only once.

Pythons are active by night as well as by day. They are nocturnal chiefly during midsummer, when the temperature of the air is warm and therefore conducive to greater activity. Heat produces enervation and general lassitude in most warm-blooded animals, including man ; it has the opposite effect on snakes.

At one time we used to keep pythons in the larger Snake Park, but eventually we were obliged to construct a special house and small park for them. When in the Snake Park they played havoc with the lotus lilies and stirred up the mud in moat and pond.



A NEW ARRIVAL AT THE SNAKE PARK
It was captured in Zululand. Its length is 18 feet 3 inches.

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One day an extra large fellow was put in. Forthwith he pushed his way into one of the beehive-shaped straw snake huts, and, getting wedged inside, tumbled over and over, and eventually toppled into the centre pond. There, but for the timely intervention of the keeper, he would have been drowned, owing to his inability to get out of the hut, which sank to the bottom of the water.

The other denizens of the Park then began to get really annoyed because this exceptionally big snake took not the slightest notice of them. When it suited his convenience he crawled, rudely enough, over them. When basking in the sun's rays he reposed himself on top of them. And none were sufficiently alert to get out of his way. A hundredweight of python dumping itself on top of one is enough to make any snake indignant. But while the *Schaapstekers*, *Boomslangs*, *Mole Snakes*, and many others meekly endured the indignity and the physical discomfort, the slow and surly Puff Adders actively resented it. Every time the python attempted to make mats of them they retaliated by sheathing their long poison fangs in his great body.

The python did not die of this poison. Its only

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effects were swellings at the seat of the bites, which, if not immediately lanced to get rid of the accumulated serum, developed into abscesses, which had to be cut out and the wounds cleaned, sterilized, and sewn up.

Twenty-five times I operated thus on that python. Then one day a Puff Adder fresh from the veld bit him on the side of his head. Again I lanced the swelling. But, alas! this time the venom was too strong—the python died.

The African Python does little harm apart from an occasional visit to a farmer's fowl-roost. And the farmer who is so careless of his poultry as to leave them unprotected deserves to lose them.

Ninety per cent. of their food consists of creatures that have no economic value, and many that are a serious pest to man. Consequently the python is of real value for its efficiency in destroying such animals.

In sugar-cane plantations pythons are invaluable, for they prey upon the rats that are apt to multiply so prodigiously in the cane-brakes—thanks to the nourishing diet of sugar-cane.

Planters in Africa have an even more formidable pest to contend with in the cane rat, a

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rodent allied to the porcupine, and the size of a full-grown rabbit. It is as destructive in a plantation as is a beaver in a wood. Pythons relish these cane rats and prefer them to any other food. Sugar-planters should, therefore, safeguard the pythons from molestation by their ignorant labourers.

Young pythons prey largely upon rats and mice, but the larger ones take more bulky food when it comes their way. Their range of diet is a wide one, including such small antelope as the Grysbok, Cape Duiker, Blue Duiker, and the rare, spring hare, dassie (or rock rabbit), monkey, wild cat, and some of the larger birds.

In localities inhabited by jackals, pythons prey both on the adults and their puppies. A farmer in the Bechuanaland Protectorate wrote, in sending me a pair of large pythons :

I am rather loth at parting with these reptiles. They are one of our biggest assets in keeping down spring hares, jackals, and rats. I once shot a python, and, on dragging it out into the open, I noticed that its body bulged in the middle. On opening it I found a full-grown jackal in the stomach. I have never killed a python since, as they are too useful.

CHAPTER II

MY FIRST PYTHON—AND A FABLE

THOUGH I was born in Ireland and of Irish parents, my birth in the land of my forefathers was just an accident.

One of my jolly old ancestors, for want of something better to do, came up against the British Government and was arraigned for high treason. He escaped being hanged or shot, but his estates and title were confiscated.

My father gathered up what was left, and eventually landed in Natal, where he helped to blaze a trail for others to follow.

After many long years he prospered, and dreamed of going back to Ireland to buy back some portions of his ancestral lands. He went. And while he was there I arrived on the scene.

The call of the veld was, however, too strong for my father, and once again we find him in Natal. So I think I may call myself a South African bred in Natal, with all the love of mountain, forest, and veld in my blood.

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All my spare hours, from earliest childhood, were spent with the creatures of the wild. They were, and are, my friends. I love them, even the worst of their kind.

True, there are many in South Africa that must be slain. For it is ordained, in order that those of our species may live and multiply, that there be war against the country's sub-human inhabitants. The lion, leopard, jackal, and similar folk of veld, kloof, and bush that I admire for their beauty, strength, and sagacity must, of necessity, be slain by man or he must retire and leave their kind in possession of the land.

It is a cruel law that in order that one creature may live another must die. But man is most cruel of all. The sub-human folk kill to live; man kills for sport, for amusement, for profit, for the pure lust of killing. He goes forth and kills a beautiful creature that has as much right to life as himself. What is most remarkable is that he glories in the act.

But what has all this to do with pythons?

It is just a preamble to relieve my feelings before telling some true stories of the giant snakes I respect and admire for the good work they do in preying on the various rodents which

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gnaw our young trees, spoil our plantations, broadcast plagues, and levy so heavy a toll on our crops.

Few, besides farmers, realize how much good provender finds its way into the digestive organs of rodents. But for these there would be food enough and to spare for every man, woman, and child dwelling upon the bosom of Mother Earth. Is it, then, a matter for wonder that I wax indignant when man goes forth and deliberately slays the creatures God has provided to help him in his struggle for bread?

Truly, we as a race are crassly stupid. Determinedly we foul our own nests, queer our own pitches. At school our children are crammed with so much useless and unpractical information, and so handicapped at home with preparatory work, that they have neither time nor place for the acquisition of practical and humane knowledge of a kind that would make them useful and capable both individually and collectively.

Pythons are of great economic value when in their rightful place—the plantations, sugar-cane fields, and the like, where they cannot rob fowl-roosts nor prey on small stock. To destroy them is always a mistake, and, though I have been

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myself a hunter of pythons, I have seldom killed one. I have captured them for purposes of study, and to serve as object-lessons in the Museum.

The first python I encountered literally raised the hair on my head and sent a chill down my back—the feel of a slab of ice slithering down between shirt and skin ! This was the way of it.

One day I was toiling painfully up a scrub-covered mountain-side, very rocky and steep. I had eyes and ears only for sight and sound of the birds I was studying at the time.

Suddenly I stubbed my toe heavily into something soft, and I pitched on top of a python, a big fellow who had selected a nice open patch wherein to soak himself in the sunshine and doze peacefully while his dinner, of a Duiker buck, was digesting. My advent alarmed him, and all I saw was a glistening mass of moving coils and scales. But the instincts of my remote ancestors of the wild flamed into action. I somersaulted over and over, and then sat up.

Glaring in my direction was a giant python, capable of crushing me as easily as I could have demolished an egg. The reptile hissed viciously: his forked tongue played and flickered like a naked flame.

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Stupidly and stolidly I stared back at him. He continued to glare at me.

Then awoke his instinctive fear of my race. Or perhaps my uncanny appearance alarmed him. Or he may have reflected that he was not hungry, and I did not look good to eat. Anyway, he slid off and away, leaving me in peace.

It was rather a startling introduction to the python folk. But it interested me in the tribe, and I determined, while continuing my bird studies, to look into the ways and habits of snakes.

HOW THE PYTHON LOST ITS POISON AND THE SNAKES GOT THEIR VENOM: A FABLE

In the Malay islands and in Indo-China a monster python makes its home. It is called the Malay Python (*Python reticulatus*), and attains a length of twenty feet.

The story of how the python lost its venom and other snakes got their poison is told by the Burmese in a fable.¹

According to a Karen legend, all the poisonous serpents derive their virulence from the python, which, though innocuous now, was originally

¹ *Burma, its People and Productions*, Mason.

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the only one that was poisonous. In those days he was perfectly white. But after he had seduced a man's wife away from her husband he made her—Aunt Eu (Eve)—while in his den, weave figures on his skin, which figures still retain the original design.

At that time such was the virulence of his poison that, if he bit but the footprint of a man who had passed along a road, the man died, how far soever he might have passed from the bitten track.

But the python had no ocular demonstration of the fact, and one day he said to the crow :

“Crow, go and see if people die when I bite their foot-tracks.”

The crow thereupon went to the neighbourhood of a Karen cabin. And he found the people—as is their custom at funerals—laughing, singing, dancing, beating drums, jumping about.

And he returned to the python and told him that, far from his efforts producing death, on the contrary they produced joy.

The python was so angry on hearing this that he ascended a tree and spit up all his venom. But other creeping things came and swallowed it ; and people die of their malignancy to this day.

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The tree, therefore, whence the python spat his venom became deadly, and its juice is used to this day for poisoning arrows.

The python made the other people promise not to bite without provocation.

The cobra said: "If there be transgression so as to dazzle my eyes, to make my tears fall seven times in one day, I will bite."

So said the tiger—whose bite the Karens esteem as virulent as the python's—and others; and they were allowed to retain their poison.

But the water-snake and the frog said they would bite with or without cause, as they liked. So the python drove them into the water, where their poison melted away and their bites became harmless.

CHAPTER III

THE PYTHONS OF DOORN HOEK

AMONG the best beloved of my friends was a farmer named Hendrik Martens, of Doorn Hoek. He was a man of sterling gold, right through—a real white man. Many of his ideas and beliefs were very conservative, but he was absolutely sincere, true as steel, and his word was his bond. He was one of the true pioneer type—resourceful, self-reliant, yet kind, considerate, gentle, and forbearing. With Hendrik Martens I would have faced any peril, and I loved nothing better than a visit to his farm.

His property consisted of veld, forest, and mountain, as far on all sides as the eye could see. I made it the base of my excursions, and many an exciting adventure we had among its krantzies, kloofs, and forests.

We were at breakfast one morning when his son Alec appeared at the window with ashen face and announced that a python was in one of his rabbit hutches. Alec was a breeder of Belgian hares.

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The cages were barred in front sufficiently close to prevent the escape of a full-grown rabbit. Yet during the night a big python had squeezed himself in between the bars, and had swallowed the stud buck rabbit.

But with the rabbit inside he could not get out again. So he had coiled himself up in a corner and gone to sleep.

Thus we found him. After suffering a few prods in the ribs from the handle of a rake, he awoke to the realization that sundry faces of the dreaded and hated human folk were peering in at him.

Promptly he began to eject his meal. But the process takes some time—sufficient, in this instance, for Martens to find and bring a mealie sack. When the python pushed his head out, the sack was thrust at it. The python bit into the sack, and before it could disengage its recurved teeth Martens had its neck in his big muscular hand. Then I crawled in from the back and gripped its tail.

After some struggling we overcame the reptile's resistance and sent the rest of its body after the head into the sack.

That evening I left for home in the moonlight.



A CORNER OF THE PYTHON ENCLOSURE AT THE SNAKE PARK

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I was anxious to take the python with me, and was enabled to do so by Martens, who had solved the problem by putting the snake into a large linen bag, which we fastened securely and hoisted over the pommel of my saddle. Martens, who had been a trek-Boer in his young days, knew all that was to be known about strapping game, or anything else, securely on to horses.

"If you ride at a walking pace all will be well," he assured me.

I did not relish going so slow. But it had to be done, and my pony and I ambled off.

All went well until we began to descend the side of a mountain. Then the sack began to work off the pommel. I slid on to the pony's rump, and began struggling to drag back the load.

Alas! the python resented the jostling, bumping, and pulling, and began to hiss and struggle.

Rory, my pony, feeling the uncanny wriggling, squirming thing on his withers, turned his head and smelt the sack. Instantly, like a hare startled from its 'form,' he raced at right angles across the mountain-side, oblivious of boulders, aardvark holes, dongas, kloofs.

Where were the python and I?

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The sack, after swinging and swaying for a time, became detached and fell off. I went bumping up and down on Rory's rump, clinging with both hands to the saddle.

But neither he nor I came to any harm. Eventually he slackened his pace, and sliding to the ground I gripped the reins and pulled him up. Then I hunted for the sack and found it with the python intact. I lashed it again securely to the saddle, and did the remaining seven odd miles on foot, leading the pony.

It was three in the morning when we got home. After attending to Rory's needs, I dumped the sack containing the python on to the back *stoep* and went to bed.

Next morning a Zulu servant, thinking that the sack contained buck meat, sundered the fastenings with a knife. To his astonishment out shot a python on to the *stoep*, at the feet of the inquisitive Kafir woman cook and the housemaid.

The yells, cries, and ejaculations of those silly folk broke rudely into my pleasant dream of a hunt and the capture of a caveful of pythons.

When I got outside, the python was gone; the women were hugging one another; the Zulu's

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jaw had dropped, and his eyes were staring into vacancy. Giving his jaw a tap, I closed his mouth. . . .

The empty sack made explanations unnecessary. But we found the python a week later.

I was grubbing with a hoe in my flower garden when a woman's shriek, shrill, long, and agonizing, rent the glorious morning air, breaking in on my reflections.

I was a bachelor then, and women were beings I admired and worshipped only from afar. I could pick up venomous snakes, capture pythons, or anything like that, without so much as a thrill. But when I spoke to a girl my heart used to flutter and beat so fast that I talked and felt like a perfect fool.

Imagine, then, my emotion on hearing that woman's shriek. Dropping my hoe, I raced in the direction whence it came, climbed over a barbed-wire fence, muttered some bad words in Dutch and English at the man who had invented those barbs, and found myself in a vegetable patch, where I discovered the origin of the cry.

A woman, my neighbour's wife (whom most certainly I did not covet), flew into my arms and clung round my neck.

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“Please, madam, let me go!” said I. And she did.

She too had had an inspiration to work in the flower garden. In turning over a pile of weeds, there, beneath, coiled in as small a space as possible, she had come upon my python.

So glad was I to see it again that I fell, literally, on its neck and embraced it—an embrace from which it could not release itself until my trusty Zulu had responded to my shouted demands for a sack.

THE INTOXICATED PYTHON

“Hallo, Hendrik! Come right in and sit down! What brings you into town to-day?”

Such was my greeting to my friend as his smiling face suddenly appeared round the edge of my laboratory door.

“I trekked in with a load of mealies,” he replied, “and wattle bark and a python for you.”

“Hurrah! How kind of you to bring it in! Where is it?”

Martens had the snake in his wagon, and in a very short time it was brought into my office and dumped, still in its mealie sack, on to the floor.

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“He is a big fellow and fierce,” said Hendrik. “We captured him yesterday, and he tore the skin of a Kafir’s arm to ribbons with his teeth. Look at that ! ”

Martens hitched up his trouser leg and pulled down his sock. Around the calf of the leg was a broad purple weal.

“By Jove ! What a fearful bruise ! Did the python do that ? ”

“Yes, he did ! ” muttered Martens. And after swearing in Dutch at the captive snake, he told me how the reptile had gripped his ankle with its tail and thrown a coil round his leg. But before it could secure a grip on his body four lusty Kafirs had fallen on it, and after the usual rough-and-tumble struggle the snake had been overpowered and Martens’ leg released.

It was after closing time ; the Museum Kafirs had departed. I had no cages at the Museum ; my residence was three miles away ; my native groom was waiting for me with my horse. So I decided to leave the python in the sack until the next morning.

The fastenings were examined ; everything looked secure ; Martens assured me that the

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snake could not possibly get out. So I dragged the sackful of snake into the laboratory, left it on the floor, and closed the door.

At nine next morning I dismounted outside the Museum; handing over the horse to my groom, I walked down the passage to the outer door of my office. There I was startled at the sight of fluid, which gave off strong fumes of alcohol, oozing from beneath the door.

The laboratory walls were fitted with many rows of shelves, on which stood hundreds of bottles containing specimens of every kind and description, pickled in alcohol of seventy per cent. strength. Chemical apparatus, and the many scores of fragile things always found in a museum laboratory, were littered about. On the floor stood a huge jar filled with alcohol.

Hastily I flung open the door—the floor was saturated with alcohol. I thought that the spirit jar had burst or a bad leak had sprung in the earthenware overnight.

But worse had happened.

On attempting to open the laboratory door, I met with strong resistance. A rattle of broken glass greeted my ears. Forcing the door sufficiently ajar with my foot, I contrived to squeeze

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through. And then I got one of the greatest surprises of my life.

The whole floor was littered with broken bottles, broken apparatus, with instruments, and other museum material. The room reeked with alcohol. The fumes almost overpowered me. Hastily I retired. Then, taking a deep breath, I re-entered, picked my way among the *débris* to the window, and flung it open.

All this had come upon me with such bewildering suddenness that I did not think about the python. In my brain, confused by the alcohol-laden air, there arose a dim thought that during the night an earth tremor must have occurred, of sufficient shuddering intensity to shake the bottles off the shelves without causing collapse of the walls.

And then I remembered the python. Was the snake buried under the great pile of broken bottles and specimens? Had it perished miserably in its sack-prison?

Seeing a corner of the sack, I pulled; it was too much weighted with *débris*, so I cleared some away and then tugged it free.

But it was empty. The fastenings were intact, but the cunning python had discovered a flaw in

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the material, and, by persistent pushing, had made it a hole. The stuff of which mealie sacks is made is not closely woven ; it was easy enough, once the python had made a small hole, for him to increase it, and, with his enormous strength, to push his way through the yielding sacking.

Dropping the sack, I searched the room hastily. There, beneath a bench, he lay ! With the aid of a crooked stick I dragged him out, holding the alcohol-saturated sack in my left hand to receive the blow should he make a drive at me.

But the python was as drunk as a medieval fiddler after a dance. Yes ! He was as fuddled as the squires of the good old days, when, after a hunt, they slipped, one by one, under the dining-table.

To relieve my outraged feelings I stubbed him fiercely with the toe of my boot. The creature merely hissed, not angrily, but in a good-natured kind of way.

Never, before or since, have I seen a snake so well satisfied with himself. Coming, as he did, direct from the wilds, he should have been mortally afraid of me, or deeply resentful and indignant at being imprisoned. But not he. He seemed to be regarding me as a brother python,

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as a long-lost friend. I am sure that if he could have spoken he would have said, "Hallo, old bean!" or something like it.

Yes, the python was drunk.

But he had not drunk the spirit. He had simply absorbed it through the walls of his long, sac-like lung, until his blood-vessels could hold no more. The air in the closed room was saturated with the fumes of the spilt spirit, and the python had become intoxicated by breathing it. But how had he created such havoc?

It was not the result of a drunken revel. After escaping from the sack the python had searched every nook and cranny of the room for a possible way out, as is the way of his kind. At last, climbing on to a shelf, he had dragged his huge bulk along behind the row of bottles and shot them off into a heap on the floor. He did the job thoroughly, for he left not a foot of any of the many shelves unexplored. On the topmost shelf remained a single lonely jar as a souvenir of the occasion.

Then the business of the day began. A Scotch cart was sent for, and two loads of broken glass were carted away, after the pickled insects, reptiles, mammals, and scores of miscellaneous

PYTHONS AND THEIR WAYS

creatures had been reclaimed from the *débris*. Alas ! to a considerable degree their scientific value was lost. When a specimen of sufficient value to keep is obtained, it is preserved in spirit, or by some other process, in a receptacle to which is attached a label bearing its name, locality, and date of finding, and any other detail. The python had made havoc of both the specimens and their labels.

The still intoxicated reptile was sent to my residence, and there put into a roomy cage to sleep off his spree.

He remained in a torpid condition for twenty hours. Then he awoke to find himself a captive. His last remembrance must have been very confused, but he lost no time in idle reflections.

Every inch of his cage was examined ; then, finding no possible outlet, he coiled himself up very sulkily into a corner. Whenever I peered in at him he hissed and lunged viciously. Possibly his head ached, and his alcohol-saturated liver made him irritable.

I told a friend about the episode. He, in turn, passed it on. Another friend related it to a local newspaper reporter, with many additions and improvements. One of these was that the snake

THE PYTHONS OF DOORN HOEK
got hilariously drunk, escaped by the chimney,
and had not been recaptured.

Next morning, on opening my newspaper, I was
confronted with headings in large type :

ESCAPE OF GIANT PYTHON!

MAD WITH DRINK!

AT LARGE IN THE CITY!

MUSEUM LABORATORY WRECKED!

CHAPTER IV

PRODIGIOUS FARE

ON one of my visits to Hendrik Martens I congratulated him on the fine crop of beans in one of his twenty-acre fields. They were just about coming to maturity.

I visited the farm again a week later, and, after discussing the topics of the day, Hendrik and I got on to crops and the weather.

“How is your field of beans?” I asked.

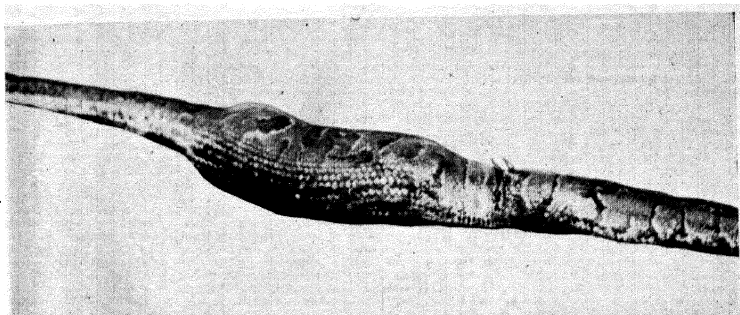
“Come and see!” he replied.

Forthwith we went. But instead of beans I saw a bare field.

“Locusts?” I queried.

“Locusts! No . . . the Duikers did it.”

Duiker bucks had increased to such an extent in the wooded kloofs and scrub-covered mountain-sides that they had become a pest. In the stillness and safety of the night they emerged from their leafy lairs and feasted on the farmers’ tender and succulent crops of forage, young mealies, and vegetable-garden produce. Their depredations



SECTION OF A PYTHON AFTER SWALLOWING A CAPE DUIKER BUCK,
HINDQUARTERS FIRST

The horns of the buck perforated the stomach and skin. They are visible in the photograph. The tail end of the python is on the left.



A SOUTH AFRICAN PYTHON AFTER SWALLOWING A HALF-GROWN
LEOPARD

PRODIGIOUS FARE

had at last become so serious that it was imperative their numbers should be reduced.

So word went forth that on a certain day a buck hunt would take place.

Early on the appointed morning a small army of natives, armed with spears and kerries and attended by an assortment of curious-looking mongrel dogs, assembled at the rendezvous. Spreading out in crescent form, they entered the bush. The mounted gunmen meanwhile stationed themselves at various points of vantage, to shoot the bucks as they broke cover.

During the progress of that hunt the dogs bayed a python. Before we could get to the scene the natives had slain the snake—as they usually do at these hunts.

But this python was enormously distended, and upon examination we found the horns of a Duiker ram sticking out fully two inches from its side. When the stomach of the snake was slit, the half-digested body of the buck was disclosed.

Apparently the movements of the snake, after it had swallowed the buck, had caused the sharp horns to penetrate the stomach muscles and skin. But if the snake had not been violently disturbed,

PYTHONS AND THEIR WAYS

and if it had not met so untimely a death, the buck would have been digested, bones and all, and the horns would have worked out.

Later on I saw an instance of this. A python was captured unhurt, with a pair of Duiker buck horns protruding between its ribs. A slight pull detached them ; the flesh of the snake had healed right up to the skin. Wounds in wild animals invariably heal rapidly, without any suppuration, unlike those of domestic animals and civilized human beings.

At Palapye, in Bechuanaland, a python nearly sixteen feet in length once constricted a full-grown Duiker ram that had horns four inches long. The python swallowed the prey, hind-quarters first, and the entire buck, horns and all, was worked down to the reptile's stomach. Subsequently the horns punctured the snake and protruded through the skin between the ribs.

When the snake's body was cut open, the appearance of the buck in its stomach showed that it must have been swallowed at least three days before the natives killed the snake.

But there was an occasion when the snake did not succeed in swallowing the buck. We found

PRODIGIOUS FARE

a python one day lying helpless, with the head and horns of an adult Duiker buck protruding from the left side of its jaws.

The reptile had constricted and elongated the body of the buck to prepare it for the swallowing process. But instead of starting at the head it had begun with the hind quarters. And as the victim's body was forced down the throat of the snake, the hind legs doubled up under the abdomen. The natives had speared the snake before my arrival, so I told them to make a complete job of the gruesome business and put the creature out of its misery.

On measuring the snake I found that it was seventeen feet long.

THE PYTHON AND THE BLUE DUIKER

One of my next experiences was to witness the acting of a forest tragedy and the feast that followed it.

Lying concealed one day in the midst of a tangled leafy lair, I had focused my binoculars on some Blue Duikers daintily picking leaves from the foliage in a Natal forest glade. Suddenly a dark brown streak seemed to drop from amid a leafy branch. Next moment one of the beautiful

PYTHONS AND THEIR WAYS

little bucks was in the remorseless grip of a python.

It was useless to interfere; at best the only result would have been a quicker end to the crushed and mangled form. So I sat and watched, as the python slowly swallowed its victim, recording it all in my notebook.

Not for one moment did I think of slaying the python. It was merely following its instincts. Wanting food, it had been lying concealed along the branch of a forest tree, gripping a strong branch with its tail, until its prey came to it. When the buck was immediately underneath, the snake dropped upon it. Securing a grip with its jaws, the reptile released its tail, fell to the ground, and gripped its victim—all within a second of time.

“ONE MORE UNFORTUNATE”

Reclining one day under the shade of a forest tree in Natal, while my Basuto pony idly nibbled at the foliage, I was startled by a piteous bleat, as of some animal in dire distress.

Jumping up, I hastened in the direction of the sound, and on emerging from the shelter of the forest, there, on the slope a stone's throw away,

PRODIGIOUS FARE

I beheld a python in the act of constricting a Duiker buck.

The victim was already in the coils ; it was too late to save it. So I returned for my pony and sat down in the shade to watch the process of swallowing.

For twenty minutes the python lay apparently motionless. Nevertheless it was busy all the time, pressing its victim's body ever tighter and tighter with the marvellously strong muscles Nature has provided for securing its food.

Presently the coils relaxed, the snake raised its head and cautiously scrutinized its surroundings. Then, satisfied that no enemy was near, it began to examine its prey. Finding the head, it lapped its flexible jaws over the nose of the dead buck. Then followed its slow ingestion. Inch by inch the body disappeared, the snake making apparently herculean efforts to accomplish the seemingly impossible task.

Time and again the reptile rested for a space, only to resume its labours with even greater deliberation. An hour passed ; the prey was still in view. But suddenly the process of swallowing was expedited, and after the lapse of another half-hour even the hind legs had vanished from

PYTHONS AND THEIR WAYS

sight. Then after resting for a while the python crawled sluggishly away and vanished into the now deepening shades of the forest.

That night as I sat gazing into the embers of my lonely camp fire I thought of the tragedies always taking place. That one creature may live another must die. So apparently ruthless is Nature. Yet, if I had arrived a few minutes earlier that afternoon, should I have been justified in saving the buck? The python had as much right to live as had the buck. If by reason of superior cunning and infinite patience it had secured a meal sufficient to last it for a fortnight, had I any moral right to interfere and deprive it of the fruit of its endeavours? If I had come on the scene in time, some impelling urge would certainly have forced me to save the buck, and I should have congratulated myself on doing so. But, viewed calmly and logically, my action would have been wrong.

For a hundred thousand years man has slain and hunted the creatures of mountain, forest, veld, and stream, consumed their flesh, and made raiment of their pelts. Thus has he been able to multiply and spread over the fair surface of the earth.

PRODIGIOUS FARE

Later he learned to tame and breed animals for his needs. To go even further : primitive man and carnivorous animals kill for food—with them it is stern necessity. But we civilized beings of to-day take deadly weapons, slay wantonly, and call it sport.

But where is the sporting element, when fire-arms are so deadly, so accurate, and travelling facilities such that there is practically no danger in any hunting ? The animals do not get even the ghost of a ‘ sporting chance.’

CHAPTER V
THRICE VANQUISHED

TEN thousand hunters may roam the wilds of South Africa, or lie *perdu* for years in the forests, the rock-strewn kloofs, the mountain crannies, and not one may see a fight between a leopard and a python.

A man of my acquaintance, however, once saw such a fight almost from the start, certainly to the finish.

One morning early, excited shouts from his native servants awoke him from his sleep on the mosquito-proof enclosed *stoep* of his house.

“*Baas!* Come quick! Bring a gun! A leopard calls!”

The planter was out of bed and had seized his rifle and cartridge-belt in less time than it takes to tell. The low, guttural growling of an angry leopard indicated its whereabouts; followed by the servant, my friend hastened thither, and breaking through a belt of bush he saw, close ahead, a sight possibly never seen before by mortal man.

THRICE VANQUISHED

Backing into the scrub, he fell to his knees and watched.

A python and a leopard were in deadly combat, and evidently it would be a fight to a finish.

Pythons do not deliberately attack leopards ; leopards do not, as a rule, seek a fight with a python. In this instance no doubt the python had been lying in ambush, on the watch for anything edible that might pass within striking distance. The leopard, also out on the prowl, had been hoping to secure a meal by snatching a goat, fowl, or monkey.

The python, seeing a moving object, struck and attempted to secure a strangle-hold. It had the leopard in a three-coil grip ; its head was hidden under a fourth coil to protect it from the gnashing jaws of the leopard.

The snake was still, as if cast in bronze. Its death-grip had been secured ; it was awaiting the weakening and collapse of its intended victim.

But it had not reckoned with the offensive armament of its foe. True, the leopard was so constricted that it was unable to use its terrible jaws to practical advantage. But one forepaw and one hind foot were free ; with these it was

PYTHONS AND THEIR WAYS

slowly, but surely, slitting the skin of the snake into ribbons.

The reptile never winced, never moved, except to tighten imperceptibly, or shift, its embrace.

Presently the leopard was on its back, snarling horribly and gnashing at the air with its formidable jaws, while it tried to get a leverage with its free foot.

Then the python made a fatal move. Driven at last by pain, or in order to secure a better hold that would bring its constricting coils over the leopard's lungs and finish the fight quickly, it withdrew its head from the protecting coil.

Quick as a flash the leopard saw its advantage. Before the python could effect the deadly extra lap round the chest of its foe, the leopard snapped and the neck of the python was within its jaws. With strength increased a hundredfold by pain, remorseless hate, anger, the teeth crashed through flesh and bone : the python was done.

The battle was over. The great coils began to relax, then unwind ; presently the snake was rolling and tumbling over the short grass in its death-throes.

And what of the leopard ? Its hind legs and the lower part of its body lay crushed and help-

THRICE VANQUISHED

less, shapeless, on the ground. But the spirit of the beast was unconquerable. Resting on its forelegs, it watched every movement of the python—ready, if necessary, to renew the fight.

Then the silent observer intervened. Emerging from his lair, gun in hand, he strode forth into the open space.

Snarling fiercely, the leopard, erect now on its forefeet, faced the new danger. Desperately it sought to close. Its body was hopelessly crushed, but, summoning all its strength, the brave animal dragged its paralysed form several yards . . . then a bullet in its brain ended its sufferings.

On examination the lower part of the leopard's body and thighs proved to be a pulped mass ; but chest, lungs, and heart were uninjured. Had the man not appeared, the victor of the fight would have lingered on miserably for days. Its ultimate recovery was impossible.

UNITY IS MIGHT

I witnessed one day a fight to the death between a colony of fifteen Bushy-tailed, or *rooi* (red), Meercats (*Cynictis penicillata*) and a python.

The snake had made an attack on a meercat

PYTHONS AND THEIR WAYS

colony on the veld, adjacent to a scrub-covered hillside. Issuing from cover, the python had entered one of the burrows, but, being immediately assailed—and most persistently—by the meercats, it withdrew hastily and took up an attitude of defence.

Wildly excited, the meercats gathered round the python. Whenever a chance offered they made a sally, buried their teeth in the flesh of the foe, and jumped hurriedly out of danger again.

Presently the python made a lightning-like lunge and gripped a meercat in its powerful jaws. One coil went simultaneously round the victim, and its life was instantly crushed out of it.

But the stupid reptile held on to its prey while the other meercats were assaulting its body. Blood was oozing from innumerable tears and bites in its flesh, yet it held grimly on to the little body within its coils.

Then, with a sudden sweep of its tail, it gathered up another meercat. Next instant I saw the little creature struggling and biting, with a lap of the python's tail round its body. The tail-grip tightened, the meercat gasped, impotently, for breath, and died—crushed by the steel-like grasp of that fearsome tail.

THRICE VANQUISHED

But meanwhile the surviving meercats had been tearing and biting at the body of the snake, and it was visibly weakening from loss of blood.

There is no need to describe the rest of that struggle in detail. After three hours of gallant effort the meercats had slain their foe and were lapping up its blood.

On seeing me approach, the victors scuttled away and down into their burrows.

The python's body was torn and bitten in at least a hundred places.

A MORTAL ENCOUNTER

"I say, Skib, old man, what do you say to a couple of days shooting hares on Table Mountain?"

"Jolly fine," quoth he, "when shall we start?"

"Oh, Friday morning at 4 A.M. if you like."

"Righto."

'Skib,' by the way, was a nickname we gave a chum of ours, and it arose in a very simple way. We meandered round to his pater's house one day, and our chum was calling shrilly, "*Skib—skib—skib.*" It was his call-cry to a flock of pigeons to let them know it was feeding time. So, ever after, Bertie was known as 'Skib.' He resented

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it at first and had a fight with one of us. He came out of the battle with two black eyes and a bruised cheek ; but ‘ Skib ’ he remained, and ‘ Skib ’ he is to this day ; when I meet him in the spirit world ‘ Skib ’ he will still be to me.

Yes, that name calls up vivid mental pictures of days and weeks spent together in the wilds with our ponies and dogs, and the star-spangled sky for our tent when the sun went to rest. Rain ? Oh, yes, it sometimes rained, but we just crawled under overhanging rocks, or made a lean-to of boughs to shed the major portion of the rain. If the sun shone next day it dried our clothes. If it didn’t, why, then, we just evaporated the moisture in our garments before a fire in the shelter of a krantz or a clump of bush.

Table Mountain was mentioned. Yes, but not the familiar one which frowns down on the House of Parliament in which the mighty men of intellect of the Union foregather to discuss the weighty problems of state and other things—chiefly other things.

The Table Mountain Skib and I rode out to is in Natal. It is surrounded by precipices 1000 feet in depth, but there is a rough pathway to the top—fairly easy for active men on foot, but

THRICE VANQUISHED

dangerous to horses—but ours were Basuto ponies reared on the mountains of Basutoland. We led them up this goat path, and after a long and tiring climb, dislodging boulders innumerable, we got our ponies to the top. Finding a sheltered situation screened by thick bush, and water welling up from God knows where, we staked our horses, prepared some food, and rested.

Most folk, possibly, do not know the habits of mountain hares. They live in the crevices of the rocks on and just over a precipice in situations safe from dogs and men. Here they lie during the daylight hours. At dusk they emerge and feed on the scanty herbage growing within a hundred yards of their retreats. It is only possible to shoot them when the moon shines brightly, and even the sportsman must be alert and expert, else his breakfast, dinner, and supper next day will be meatless. Ours was, because the mist rose and blotted out what we had hoped to see of the world by moonlight. Then real clouds rolled up and we sensed rain. “Sensed it?” you say. Yes, those who live long with nature develop brain centres which are dormant and inactive in average humanity, but which are very much alive in the so-called lower animals.

PYTHONS AND THEIR WAYS

Table Mountain was familiar to me—every yard of it. I knew of a titanic crack which split asunder a precipice and left a yawning chasm running from the face of the perpendicular rocky wall inward for two hundred yards. Boulders had accumulated in it, and sloped its bottom from the inner edge, making it possible to climb down and into it. The rapidly sloping bottom was studded with great tree ferns which struggled for life in the perpetual twilight of that awful chasm. It was now raining, and, impeded by our guns and food bags, we crawled backward—down—down—down, into abysmal darkness. Bumping against a tree fern, I groped for a large blaze I had made a year previously in it. I soon found a flat, rocky floor under a mass of rocks poised insecurely, and which might fall at any moment. However, when inured to danger in manifold forms, one cheerfully takes big chances, for we die but once, and it is better to pass out quickly and suddenly than by the slow process of sickness or senile decay. There is but one gate into the world beyond, and through it we must all go.

Finding our goal, the next move was to kindle a fire, warm ourselves, heat our coffee, and doze

THRICE VANQUISHED

until morning. Farther down in the inky blackness I knew there was an abundance of dry tree fern branches.

"Skib," said I, "sit tight and don't move. I'm all right, I can climb rocks like a baboon."

I didn't tell him, however, there was imminent danger of skidding along the sloping gorge's bottom and shooting out into space, to fall 500 feet. It would have made him nervous, for he was a new chum at that sort of life at the time.

Finding a clump of tree ferns, I began tearing off the dead lower leaves. Presently I seized something which moved. It felt cold. My hand shot back by instinct, for I thought it was a Black Mamba. I knew these fearsome snakes were in the neighbourhood, because I had shot them and often lost dearly beloved dog chums by their potent venom. But the snake was a python. In the sooty darkness it lunged and took a mouthful of shirt and tough shoulder-muscle. Then, with deadly intent, it groped with its tail to locate my body. The squirming tail, twisting and curling, slithered across my chest. I gripped it with both hands. My only hope of surviving the combat lay in preventing that deadly tail curving round my body or neck. In

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similar manner we had seen a Kafir's body squeezed to pulp before we could cut the reptile's head off with a jack knife. Visions of that incident rose before my mental vision while we tumbled and rolled amidst the boulders and ferns. All my energy was concentrated into the one desperate endeavour to hold the python's tail.

Meanwhile my friend, hearing the din of battle, shouted vainly for instructions. I heard him not. I was too preoccupied in mind and body. In those days I was tough and strong—every muscle fibre was like tempered steel with rough riding, climbing, and roaming in the wilds. Well it was for me that this was so, else I should not be relating the incident in the calm security of a study at Port Elizabeth.

When in desperate need one's primitive animal instincts arise and flame out. Instinctively I sought for the python's neck with my lips, and gripped it with my teeth. Fiercely and savagely I bit, and my teeth closed down and sank in. I felt the backbone yield. An instant later the hitherto taut muscles of the snake relaxed and the body lashed and squirmed aimlessly. Securing the knife at my belt, I severed the python's head.

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Gathering up a pile of dry fronds, I at last joined my shivering friend. After kindling a fire I related the details of the battle to Skib. We then feasted and enjoyed ourselves, while a thunderstorm raged on the world overhead and a cascade of dirty water raced past and away into space.

CHAPTER VI

THE TRAGEDY OF IMPUNZI

IMPUNZI was a Natal Kafir who often accompanied us on our excursions into the wilds. He was well versed in native lore and the traditions, superstitions, and beliefs of his race. His hatred of the Zulus, of whose race he was an offshoot, was intense.

For Cetewayo, the Zulu king, had ‘eaten up,’ as the Zulus term it, his father’s kraal. In other words, Cetewayo had sent a regiment with orders to slay secretly every man, woman, and child at this particular kraal, and to loot all its cattle. Impunzi was a boy at the time, and he escaped the stabbing spears of Cetewayo’s warriors by diving into the scrub and worming his way through its tangled bosom to a secret lair. Hence his name, Impunzi, after the Duiker buck that often start from cover into the open in full view, only to dive again into cover next instant.

Impunzi loved fresh meat that he could grill on the embers of the evening fire when the day’s

THE TRAGEDY OF IMPUNZI

labours were over. Venturing forth one day with the dogs and an old muzzle-loader gun, he had an adventure which led, later on, to tragedy.

A python, lying in ambush on the look-out for anything he could eat, seized and constricted one of our favourite fox-terriers. Impunzi bounded to the rescue and severed the head of the great snake from its body. But, alas ! the dog was already beyond all possibility of recovery, and, with much lamentation and many affectionate farewells, Impunzi put the poor little victim out of pain.

When he returned to camp with the sad news and the skin of the python we were much concerned. And our concern grew as we heard Impunzi, over the camp fire, relating the details of the affair and his own part in it to the group of wondering, wide-eyed natives who had foregathered from neighbouring kraals.

For Kafirs believe that the gall of a man who has killed a python will confer on him who swallows it wonderful vigour, courage, and longevity. And though, to-day, the slaying of a python by a native would not involve him in any danger other than that of the encounter, it

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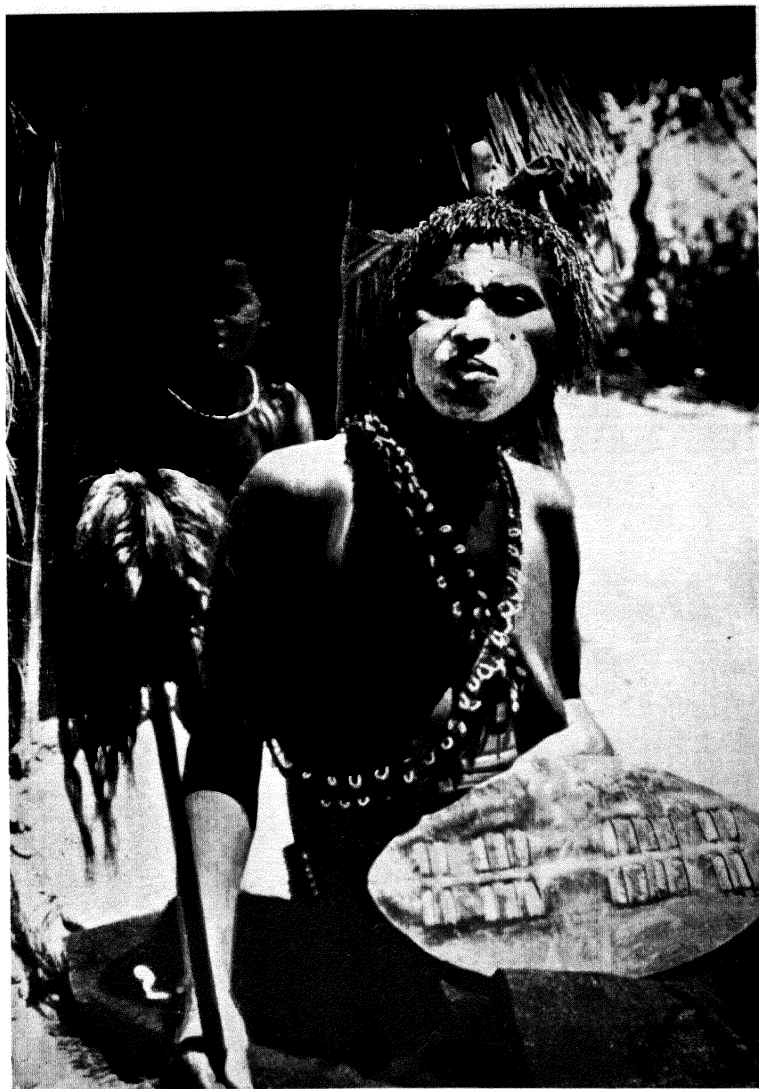
was not so a few years ago, when native chiefs were apt to take the law into their own hands.

The law of the white man operated in Zululand at that time, too ; but there was no one to enforce it. And the misdoings of a chief were never divulged by his followers. If personal loyalty was insufficient to restrain them, they knew full well that betrayal of the chief would be followed by their own premature death.

The news of Impunzi's slaying of a python spread over the district. And it reached the ears of a powerful, but crafty and unscrupulous, old chief who possessed the courage of a tiger, but who lacked vigour, and knew that his days were numbered. This old man loved the good things of life, and he had them in plenty : droves of fat cattle, granaries full to overflowing with *amabele* (Kafir corn) for making beer, and, lastly, a harem of fifteen wives, recently reinforced by the addition of three comely maids.

He coveted Impunzi's gall. And what he set his mind on he usually succeeded in obtaining if it was attainable.

The witch-doctor, a woman, was sent for to the kraal of the chief, who lay on a mat, shamming illness. With groans and lamentations he



A ZULU WITCH-DOCTOR

THE TRAGEDY OF IMPUNZI

declared that he was appallingly ill, and proclaimed aloud that he had been bewitched.

The grief-stricken wives were ordered to retire. When the chief was alone with the witch-doctor he declared to her his desire to procure the gall of the python-slayer, to retrieve by its aid his youthful vigour and a longer span of life.

"Ten fat cows if you succeed," he whispered. And the bargain was struck.

A weird and repulsive-looking object, the witch-doctor ! Nevertheless her keen and flashing eyes, the determined set of her face, proclaimed that she was above the average in mentality. Of unusual height, she was straight of figure, and had a commanding air. Her face was smeared with daubs of white and red pigments. Her hair hung in tightly coiled ringlets. And many strings of the claws and bones of birds, reptiles, beasts, hung from her neck. Her whole person was decorated with oddments, such as blown-out bladders, bits of medicinal bark, and dried snakes' heads.

The practice known as 'smelling out' was forbidden at that time. Nevertheless it was largely followed, but not openly. In this instance

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it was conducted secretly at the chief's kraal at midnight, in the light of the full moon.

We learned afterward that fifty men, and more, were assembled in a circle, each squatting, in typical Kafir style, on his haunches. After many mutterings, exclamations, and contortions, the witch-doctor crouched down, fell on her knees, and crawled round the circle of terrified men, sniffing at each.

Then, bounding to her feet, she writhed, twisted, leaped, yelled, and foamed at the mouth to inspire reverence, awe, and fear in the minds of the assembled people. She waved her wand, pointed it here and there, addressed it affectionately, and conjured it to point to him who had bewitched the chief.

The trembling men were in a very hell of torture, for none knew to whom she might point. Should that terrible wand touch a man, the pent-up feelings of the rest would burst forth and find relief in expressions of hate against the victim, who, a moment before, was perchance an esteemed friend.

And then the air would be rent by ferocious yells, and the supposed evildoer would be led or dragged out and brutally done to death.

THE TRAGEDY OF IMPUNZI

But in this instance the 'smelling out' was simply a blind to work upon the passions of the assembled crowd.

Simulating a trance, the witch-doctor declared that she saw a man in a far-off camp. Yes, it is the camp of a white man. There, at a fire near the wagon, Kafirs are assembled. She sees written in the heart of one the sign of the evil spirit.

Raising her voice, she declares that it is a man who slew a giant snake single-handed. Yes . . . she reads his mind. In it there is ambition born of the courage which passed into him when the spirit of the python fled to the underworld. The slayer of the python seeks to kill the chief and claim his place as ruler of the tribe.

Later on we learned that this was the very tribe over which Impunzi's father had ruled. But he had never told us, nor even hinted that he knew anything about the people other than that he had been through the district before with other hunting parties.

The outcome of the 'smelling out' at the chief's kraal was the dispatch of three men, whose identity was known only to the witch-doctor, with orders to do Impunzi to death as

PYTHONS AND THEIR WAYS

soon and as secretly as possible and take his gall.

The camp was thenceforth kept under observation. And when Impunzi again ventured forth alone he was ambushed.

This time he had his assagais and a kerrie with him. But two assagais were thrown at him from behind. With them in his back, he faced three Zulus, who were leaping forth to complete their work with the deadly stabbing spear. Impunzi was too badly wounded to cast his own assagais. But, closing with the foremost of his foes, with a desperate lunge he drove his spear through the body of the man, so that it protruded full twelve inches out of his back. . . .

Thus we found them. Impunzi had been disembowelled, as is the Zulu custom when a man is slain in fight.

Apparently it was a vendetta, or something of the sort. So the others said. But I, knowing how small were the chances of a man who had slain a python living to a good old age, determined to make sure. Yes, it was true enough. Examination of the liver disclosed the reason for Impunzi's murder. His gall had been cut out.

We had come to this remote and wild part of

THE TRAGEDY OF IMPUNZI

Zululand to study the birds and their habitats. It had been my intention to stay in the neighbourhood for at least a month. I was known to the Zulus by a native term meaning "A slayer of pythons"—though I had killed only three, and these only because it was necessary under the circumstances. But catching pythons probably meant the same to Zulus as killing them. And considering it quite possible that some other petty chief, headman, or witch-doctor might be tempted to deprive me too of my gall, I trekked forthwith to a safer locality.

CHAPTER VII

PYTHON STORIES: INCIDENTS AT THE SNAKE PARK

EARLY one morning a bronze-coloured face, with flashing, pearly teeth, framed itself in the flap of my tent door.

It belonged to Ingundana, one of my Zulu servants. For many years he had accompanied me in my excursions into the wilds, and no better guardian, no more trusty helper, could I have wished for than he was. His face was mobile as a child's, reflecting every fleeting desire of his mind. He was, indeed, one of Nature's unspoiled children, unsoiled by the blasting curse of modern so-called civilization, which brings in its train all the concentrated evils of humanity.

"*Inkosi!*" boomed Ingundana's deep bass voice. "I have found the lair of a python—a big one, *Inkosi!*"

I thrust my diary and writing-pad into a box. Ingundana collected every available native, pro-

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vided them with picks and shovels, and we set forth to dig out the python from its retreat in the hole of an aard-vark.

The labour was long and heavy. But everything has an end, and so has an aard-vark hole.

Fierce hisses from its dark depths cheered and invigorated us ; they showed that our task was nearing completion ; the snake was at bay.

But so it remained, despite our efforts to induce it to make a bid for freedom.

At last, after many failures, we succeeded in getting a noose over the reptile's head. Then, with a rush, out it came, and the fun began.

Amid the war-cries, yells, ejaculations of the Kafirs, and the yelping of the dogs, the python's head was enveloped in a sack. I clung to it like bird-lime, while my natives sat on its body—or at least tried to do so.

Backward and forward and sideways the reptile threw them. Drawing up her huge bulk, she would suddenly relax and send her copper-coloured tormentors rolling in the grass.

But Ingundana was in charge of the tail, and I knew he could be trusted not to let go. The middle part of the snake didn't matter ; we cared not what it might do, for so long as the head

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and tail were impotent, the body was harmless. So we just clung on and tumbled around in the usual old way until the python gave in and we were able to thrust it into a mealie sack. Then peering into the hole, I saw, dimly, a pile of something white. Thrusting my arm in up to the elbow, I withdrew an egg, creamy in colour, with soft leathery skin, and about the size of a goose's egg. It weighed over five ounces, and contained a well-developed embryo python.

There were sixty-five eggs in the hole, and I carried away the lot. I put them into a secret hiding-place in my aunt's conservatory, calculating that the young pythons would hatch out in about two months' time.

Alas ! I forgot all about them. And I failed, which was worse, to inform my aunt that I had put them in her conservatory. I fear, however, that this omission was intentional, because my dear old aunt had a holy terror of snakes.

She wasn't really old—only fifty ; and she was as youthful in body and spirit as she was charming in manner. But she had a devil of a temper—a real, hot Irish one of the true Celtic order—and I feared it more than the attack of even a mamba or a cobra.

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Well . . . off I went on one of my excursions into the wilds. While I was away, those silly young pythons came out of their shells and scattered over the conservatory. There were a couple of score of them ; and the ferns, moss, palms, in the warm, moist air, made an ideal home. They revelled in it.

My aunt loved to water and trim her plants. One day when she was watering a pot of maiden-hair a baby python tumbled incontinently out of it.

My aunt dropped her can, screamed, and fled.

The snake was eventually caught by a Zulu and ruthlessly slain.

Thinking it a chance occurrence, and never dreaming that there were more of them, my aunt got to work again. She was repotting a great mass of fern which had grown too big for its jacket. The native carried it outside for her and, while doing so, disturbed five of my pythons that were lying asleep on the bosom of the fern.

Seeing snakes within six inches of his nose was too much for that son of Ham. With a hoarse shout he dropped the pot and fled. Later on he related the incident, with considerable

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enlargement and addition, to his friends over a pot of porridge.

The conservatory was locked up, and my aunt grimly awaited my return. By the time I arrived her anger and resentment had had time to subside a little. But I had been forewarned.

Ingundana met me at the back gate and drew me into the stable.

“*Inkosi*,” whispered he, “the *Inkosigaas* is very angry. She waits to pour out on you the vials of her wrath. *Inkosi*, you are not wise to the ways of women, you know them not. But, *Inkosi*, my father Maluti has many wives at the kraal, and my eyes are sharp and my ears long . . .”

I will not repeat his flowery and lengthy advice. Summed up, it was to overwhelm the lady with affectionate talk before she could get in a shot. And . . . bursting into the room, I took her into my arms, kissed her, smoothed her hair, and fired off questions in quick succession. . . . It wasn't merely pretence; I was very fond of my aunt.

Next day I collected all the pythons. After keeping them under observation for a week and taking many photographs of them, Ingundana

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and I carried them to a neighbouring kloof and released them. For I had no facilities at that time for feeding baby pythons.

But what of the mother? A snake pays no attention to her young. Some species lay eggs. Others give birth to young. But in either case the young are independent of their parent from birth. So the mother python did not fret over the loss of her eggs. She was kept in a large cage, and she went on hunger-strike.

Ingundana put a barn rat into the cage with the python, which took no notice of it, and in time the rat grew quite tame.

One morning Ingundana exclaimed excitedly through my bedroom window :

“ *Inkosi*, the rat has eaten the python ! ”

I replied, very rudely, that he was drunk. But his remark was not quite the height of absurdity it sounded. The rat had not completely devoured the snake. But the rascally thing had eaten patches of the tender white flesh along the top of its back. We slew the rat, and the snake's wounds soon healed.

But we nearly lost that python, later on, in a similar way.

“ Ingundana,” said I, “ try the snake with

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six white rats. They are tame, and not fierce and bloodthirsty like the wild rats."

Ingundana put the rats into the cage, and I stood by to watch the result, ready to withdraw them should they show any fear or alarm. They seemed perfectly at home, however. They explored the python, smelled her, crawled all over her body. And she took not the slightest notice.

But next morning Ingundana had again a tale to tell. During the night those six white rats had sampled the blood of the python and inflicted dozens of wounds upon her. With their sharp incisor teeth they had nipped the snake and then lapped up the few drops of blood that oozed from the punctures.

Why she had not killed the rats was a mystery. One snap of her jaws would have been almost instant death to any one of them. That she allowed herself to be assailed without retaliating is even more amazing. The air was too warm for torpidity from cold to have been the cause.

One of Ingundana's duties was to look after the python, and he did it well and thoroughly. Twice a week he summoned three other natives to his aid. The reptile was carried to the lawn

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and there anointed from nose to tail with oil. Then she was allowed to climb a tree which grew all alone in the centre of the grass. Here, coiled on the tree-top, she was permitted to bask in the sun's rays.

Ingundana usually did sentry-go himself on these occasions, but when he was extra busy another native was put on guard. One day this fellow sat himself down with his back to the trunk of the tree and had a nap.

When a native sleeps (especially after a night out), nothing short of a violent kick in the ribs will awaken him. And while he slept the python slithered down the tree and escaped.

Warning the natives to keep the matter dark, I sent them to search the neighbourhood. But their luck was out.

Two days later my aunt missed the python and asked what I had done with it. I did not want to tell her, nor did I want to tell an untruth. So I tried to side-track the question, but, woman-like, she detected my dodge and I had to tell.

“ But, Auntie, it is a dead secret, remember ! You must not breathe a word of it to anyone ! ”

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Well . . . you know what women are ! Over an afternoon cup of tea she told a friend in the strictest confidence. Her friend told another friend, and this friend told her husband. And he (men being every whit as great gossips and spreaders of scandal as women, if not greater) told it at the local school for scandal—I mean the club.

So the story of the escape of a great python spread over the neighbourhood, even throughout the city ; and the evening and morning papers soon had startling paragraphs about the incident.

My residence was in a suburb ; the pathways leading to the road were many and narrow ; and it was down these paths that school children wended their way to and from the tram terminus.

The mothers of these human cherubs were in a state of wild alarm. In imagination they visualized a great hungry python lurking in the undergrowth, eager to seize and swallow such soft, succulent morsels as their darlings.

Day after day I saw the youngsters pass my window accompanied by a hefty Zulu ‘ boy ’ armed with two fighting-sticks. (These ‘ boys,’

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JOHANNES, THE BASUTO SNAKE PARK ATTENDANT, RESPLENDENT
IN HIS NEW UNIFORM

The cap, leggings, and boots are of python-skin, and his clothes are
trimmed with the same material.

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it should be explained, who take the place of housemaids and other domestic assistants, are usually full-grown men, often six feet tall.) And again in the afternoons the 'boys' were to be seen collecting at the tram terminus to escort the children home.

It was a lean time for me. Mothers scolded ; fathers talked loud and long about getting even with me. But I was tough and hard, and my reputation as a boxer and sword-stick fighter had travelled around. So it all ended in talk.

One fellow was particularly venomous in his remarks. He had several children, and his nerves went completely west over that python. Human folk have a most unreasoning fear and loathing of snakes. If a man plants his big, ugly boot on a snake's soft and sensitive body, it has every right to bite him. I am sure I should. . . .

And in the end this man had every cause to bless the python instead of cursing it. For it wasn't only worry about his brood of young Smiths that made him so angry. He was fond of his club, and spent most of his evenings there, and bent his elbow far too often ! And now the

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nightly journey from the tram terminus to his residence, with a brain addled with whisky, and the fear of encountering a gigantic python at any moment, proved too much for him. The dread of meeting the python grew as the weeks went by. Every shadow became a reality. And at last his fear assumed such proportions that he began to stay at home instead of going to the club in the evenings.

Eventually it cured him of the club habit. And when I again got on visiting terms with that family, he was a real, good, home-loving husband and father, who helped his wife to bath the children and put them to bed !

What became of the python ? Nobody knows.

THE LAMPLIGHTER

Johannes is one of our best and most valued assistants at the Snake Park. But for two months Johannes was under a cloud of suspicion, and I was beginning to entertain grave fears lest the last snake bite he had suffered from—his thirteenth, by the way—was affecting his mentality and causing lapses of memory.

Johannes is responsible for putting the pythons

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to bed every night in their warm and cosy house that cost £500 to build.

He was in the habit of switching on the electric light when he entered the python house, and switching it off again when he left. But time and again the light was noticed burning late into the night.

Of course Johannes was blamed for neglect. And Johannes was greatly worried. He declared that he never forgot to switch off the light. But the evidence against him was too strong. The light was burning, therefore it could not have been switched off. He admitted that he, and he alone, entered the room and held the key, and he always locked the door carefully on his departure.

One day he said to my assistant : “ *Baas*, me can’t sleep no more. Me very worried.”

“ Why, Johannes ? ” asked my assistant. “ Do you think it is some evil spirit at work ? ”

“ Yes, *Baas*,” groaned Johannes.

A few nights later the mystery was solved. One fine evening I was resting on one of the seats in the Snake Park, contemplating the starry heavens. It was about ten o’clock.

Suddenly there was a blaze of light in the python house.

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Concluding that snake-stealers were at work, this time on the pythons, I peered in through a small bit of the plate-glass window whence the white frosting had been rubbed off.

And there, on the opposite side of the house, was a frisky python, with his chin resting on the electric switch and the rest of him streaming down the wall and along the floor. He looked supremely happy. Evidently the support afforded by the switch imparted a sense of comparative freedom, or perhaps it was too hot under the blankets and he was taking this novel means of cooling his bulky body.

The moral of this story is never to trust to circumstantial evidence.

MICKEY'S ADVENTURE

“ Charles, where is Mickey ? ”

“ I do not know, Madam. He was here half an hour ago.”

Charles is the houseboy. Mickey is Mrs Fitz-Simons' favourite rough-haired terrier, whose dad is a British-born aristocrat with a pedigree suitable to his high social status in the dog world.

But Mickey is an irresponsible cub, whose

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experience of life extends over a period of ten months. He has an especial affection for Johannes, and he loves to trot about close behind that black man's big splay feet.

This partiality for Johannes called for an explanation, and the question was referred to me.

"It is quite simple," I replied. "Johannes, his boots, his clothes, and the whole of him exhale an odour of snakes, rats, frogs, guinea-pigs, and rabbits; and dogs have a tremendous interest in these scents."

Mickey's fondness for Johannes very nearly ended in a tragedy. Mickey had, as usual, followed Johannes when he went to the python house to put these giant snakes to bed. He watched him keenly as he tucked them cosily, one by one, under their blankets in the thermos-heated house. Then the stolid Johannes, with an indifferent stare, glancing neither to right nor left, strode out, slammed the door, locked it, put the key in his pocket, and wended his way home, to enjoy what his wife had prepared for his supper.

Meanwhile Mickey had been missed. A hue and cry was raised. "Five shillings to the boy

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who finds him," was Mrs FitzSimons' offer to the Museum native employees.

They scattered to search the four corners of the hill whereupon dwells the aristocracy of Port Elizabeth.

One of the garden boys was giving water to thirsty plants from a can when he heard muffled barking in the direction of the python house.

It occurred to him, after a time, that it could not be a snake that was making such a doggy noise. So he went off to fetch Johannes.

And there, in the python house, was Master Mickey—none the worse for his two hours' imprisonment and added experience of the ways of pythons.

MASSACRE OF THE INNOCENTS

On one occasion a troublesome, fussy, and presuming dame, with her spectacted sister, came to the Museum and insisted upon seeing me.

"Your business, please, madam?" asked my secretary.

"Never mind my business. I want to see the Director."

"Show them in," said I.

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After some commonplace talk, the visitor came to the point.

“I want you, please, to show me the great python.”

“The native attendant to the Snake Park will do so, madam ; I will ring and tell him you are coming.”

“No. I would rather you yourself showed me ! ”

My dignity slightly outraged by the manner of this vulgar *nouveau riche*, but anxious to keep up the good reputation for courtesy in the Museum, unwillingly enough I left my work and took the two determined dames to view the python.

Having answered a string of the usual questions, I was asked :

“And now, what do you feed it on ? ”

“Kafir babies, mostly, madam. We breed them on the premises for the purpose. When these fail, we use guinea-pigs, rabbits, fowls.”

She did not seem at all startled. And soon after she took her departure. She had, it appeared, just arrived to do a lightning tour of South Africa, return to America, and write a book all about the country, its people, and its politics.

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Some weeks later an American newspaper arrived. On opening it I found, marked in blue pencil, a number of startling headlines. One of these read :

PYTHONS FED ON KAFIR BABIES

CHAPTER VIII

THE SERPENT—AND EVE

A PYTHON we had purchased from a farmer in Zululand arrived in due time at the Snake Park.

It was packed in a box many times too small for any free movement. It had travelled by ox-wagon from the farm to the nearest railway station ; thence, for some hundreds of miles, in a jolting and noisy train. Its journey had been cold and distinctly unpleasant ; and snakes are delicate creatures, highly susceptible to changes of temperature and environment.

When it reached us the python was cold, stiff, sulky, and dispirited. From long experience I knew that these were alarming symptoms that would, if not promptly countered, end in death.

The snake had been born in a rocky, bush-covered kloof where the air was moist ; to be suddenly torn from its paradise and sent to the comparatively chilly climate of Port Elizabeth was

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a severe trial to the constitution of any snake. It was necessary, therefore, to take immediate measures to dispel the icy chills from the captive's blood.

At that time there were no proper facilities available on the Museum premises. So the python was taken to my residence, where, at the end of a balcony, there was a conservatory with a plate-glass roof and sides through which the sun's rays streamed at midday.

Originally used for plants, the conservatory had somehow degenerated into a lumber-room. But here the python found a home—with a tub of water to soak in, an eiderdown quilt to sleep on, a high temperature, sunshine to bask in, and seclusion.

The intelligence of a snake is of a low order. Once it is provided with suitable water, food, and, above all, warmth, its material desires are satisfied. But this python, at intervals during the first two days after its arrival, moved restlessly around, exploring every inch of its new abode in the hope of finding a hole for escape. Eventually it settled down and became apparently resigned to the inevitable.

The lady in charge of the establishment was

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familiar with snakes. ‘Paddy’ we call her, for her real name is longish, and does not lend itself to abbreviation. And she is Irish, with the fiery, reckless blood of the ancient Celts pulsating strongly in her veins.

Pythons she held in supreme contempt. How often had she helped me to capture them in the rocky fastnesses of Natal, and directed gangs of lusty Zulus in digging them out of their retreats in aard-vark and other holes! And had she not carried them, too, for many a weary mile—carried them confined in sacks, tied to the front of her saddle, or under the seat of her ‘spider’—that most excellent of vehicles for exploring rough country.

She had helped me, too, for many years in my quest for an antidote for the venom of snakes. There were snakes scattered around everywhere in the Museum—in boxes and enclosures—for study. When any of them sulked, or went on hunger-strike—a common, but exasperating, occurrence—Paddy would thrust a glass syringe into their throats, while I held the jaws apart, and squirt down a dose of good and wholesome egg flip.

Pythons, too, of course. She had helped me

PYTHONS AND THEIR WAYS

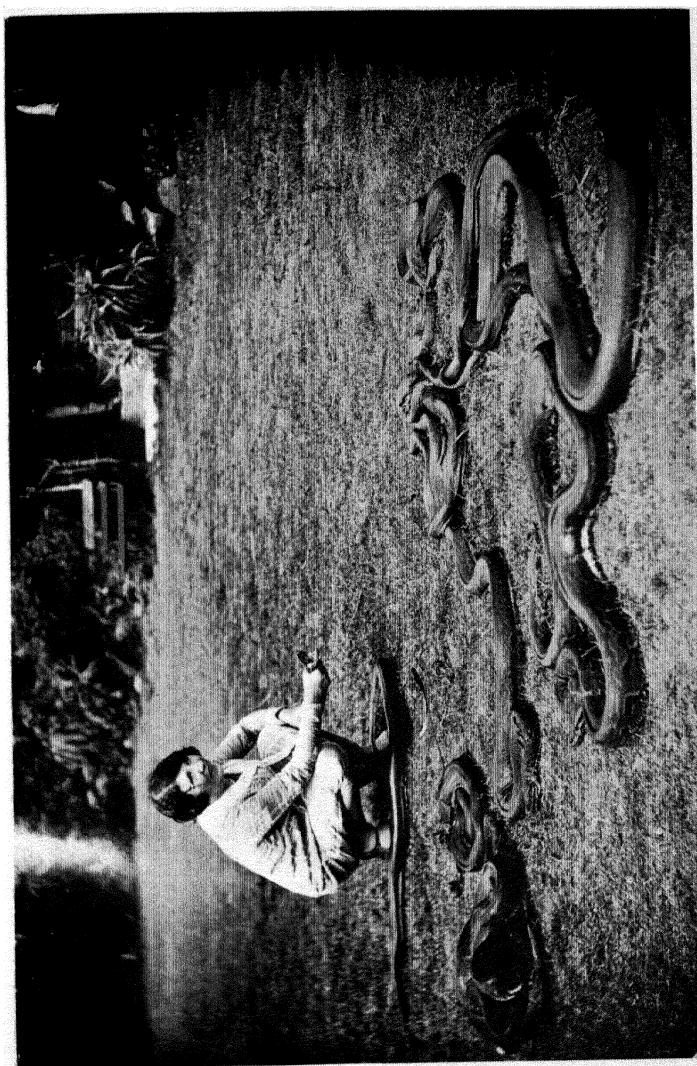
to photograph them. Together we had made sundry surgical operations on their mouths for the removal of canker. Even the deadly mamba she had fed fearlessly with egg flip, while I held the snake, gripped firmly between fore-fingers and thumbs of both hands. The bite of a mamba, by the way, is certain death, and we knew it, so no unnecessary risks were taken.

At the time that this python was sent to us the Great War was on. The nations of Europe were fighting for dear life. Paddy was very busy with War work. A children's fancy-dress ball had been organized to raise funds, and she had promised to send a bundle of material to a committee of ladies whose clever fingers would transform it into costumes.

A trunk containing ribbons, dress materials, and the thousand and one fripperies women secrete in boxes and drawers, was in the old conservatory lumber-room.

Paddy went up to see what could be found in the trunk, her mind absorbed in schemes for fancy-dresses. Entering the room, she was soon deep in her work of selecting odds and ends from its miscellaneous contents.

Suddenly the strong, oaken door slammed with



PYTHONS BEING GIVEN A SUN-BATH ON THE LAWN AT THE SNAKE PARK

THE SERPENT—AND EVE

a terrific bang, and something heavy clanged on the floor. The knob of the lock had become detached; the steel rod had shot out of its socket and was lying outside the door.

The python had been lying coiled on his quilt, sullenly watching Paddy's proceedings. She had often taken her friends up to thrill them with the sight of the great reptile. It was seventeen feet in length; its girth was great as the thigh of a Hercules.

And now the sudden noise startled it into activity. The great coils began to unfold; the sensitive, forked tongue shot out and in, incessantly.

Realizing her danger, Paddy reached out her hand to open the door. But there was no means of turning the mechanism of the mortise lock. She was trapped in a room ten feet by twelve with an angry python.

The muscular development of a python of this size enables it to crush a man to a shapeless, polony-like mass within five minutes. From her experiences in Natal Paddy knew this perfectly well. She was alive, too, to the fact that this python was brimming over with vitality, thanks to the heated atmosphere of its abode.

PYTHONS AND THEIR WAYS

From an indolent, almost moribund creature it had become imbued with fire, life, and spirit.

Pushing some boxes between herself and the reptile, Paddy hammered and banged at the door in an effort to burst it open. She lifted a small, but heavy, wooden box filled with toys, odd bits of china, medicine bottles, and drove it against the door like a battering ram. But though nothing happened to the door, the box burst, and its contents were scattered, noisily, over the floor.

This added fuel to the python's anger, and it now began to hiss furiously. When a python is seriously angry and alarmed it takes in a large volume of air, and slowly and forcibly emits it through the nostrils, making a long and penetrating, most nerve-racking hiss, of so sinister and terrifying a nature that, unless actually heard, the imagination, however vivid, cannot realize it.

Paddy retired to the corner of the room, and, with her back to the wall, faced the reptile. With its head raised it was regarding her with a baleful glare from its glistening, beady black eyes. Paddy knew what this portended. She was quite aware that emotions of fear of the

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dreaded human were battling with remorseless hate and desire to kill. Her best chance was to keep perfectly still, trusting that the python's anger and excitement would abate.

Meanwhile she thought furiously. Through her fertile brain flitted a succession of schemes for escape, or for protecting herself should the python attack her.

Escape seemed hopeless. The house stood in the midst of spacious grounds ; the nearest to it on the balcony side was quite a long way off. The conservatory was built against a blank wall. She realized that shouting for help would be quite useless ; nobody was likely to be within hearing distance. And her calls would only precipitate the attack of the python.

Death by strangulation began to seem inevitable. The python's rage had overcome its nervousness and dread of the human animal. It was now stalking its prey ; the beginning of the end had come. The python's eyes glittered evilly ; its black, forked tongue, which presaged a cruel death, shot in and out with curious vibratory movement.

The head, which at first had been poised only a foot or so above the floor, was now

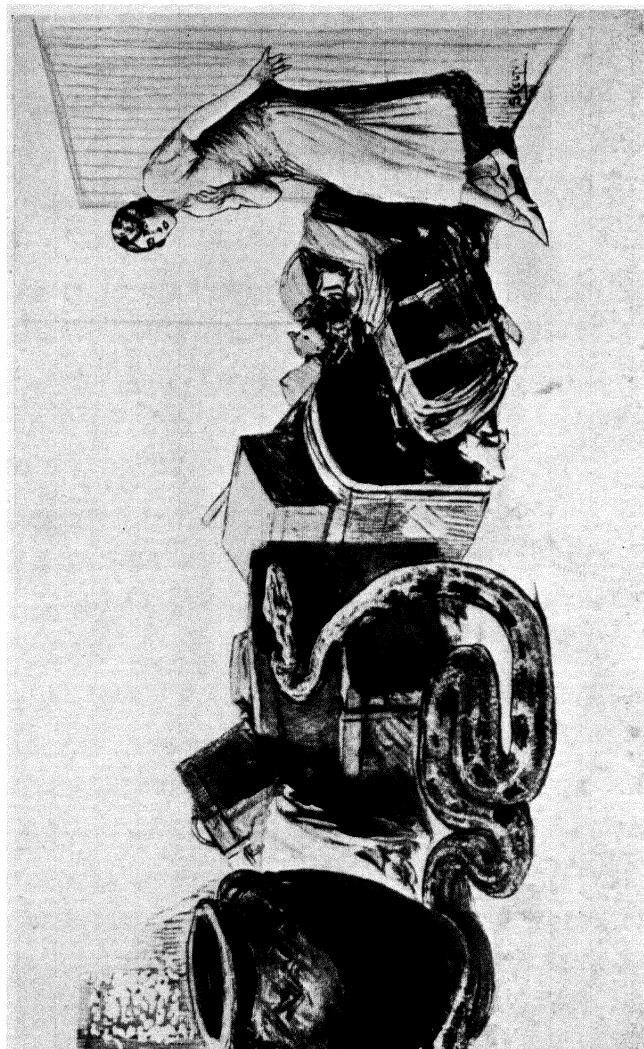
PYTHONS AND THEIR WAYS

raised a full two feet. With a thrill of horror Paddy saw that it was advancing toward her. The movement was so slow that an indifferent observer would never have noticed it. Was it trying to fascinate her?

It continued to advance, inch by inch, like a continuous flow of water along a smooth and almost level channel. And Paddy was deprived of all power of movement. Her eyes were fixed in a dull stare on that cruel head with its glittering, unwinking eyes, and the tongue that was incessantly gliding backward and forward. Whether fascinated by the reptile, or paralysed by fear, she knew not, but she no longer felt any desire to cry out or move. She seemed to be asleep, yet awake. Fear and dread had passed, her brain was no longer functioning.

At last the head of the snake ceased to move forward. It rose now, instead, with the same silent and flowing movement. The python was preparing to strike, and was gauging the distance.

Its body became animated with the same curious flowing movement. The great reptile was drawing up its bulk to enable it to obtain the necessary leverage for the final lightning thrust.



PADDY AT BAY

THE SERPENT—AND EVE

Its object was to grip its intended victim with the cruel armature of strong, conical, recurved fangs in its powerful jaws. When a stalking python strikes in this way there is no time lost—no interval allowed the victim for hitting out, struggling, dodging, escaping. Simultaneously with the grip a great coil—or a succession of coils—envelopes the prey; so rapid are the movements that the human eye cannot register the details; there is a confused blur, and next instant the snake is as still as though cut in bronze. But the victim is within those terrible folds, which now begin a series of constricting movements, slow yet continuous, until the ribs, shoulder-blades, and arm-bones of the prey are shattered, and driven, like sharp daggers, through lungs, heart, viscera.

All this Paddy knew . . . subconsciously it was all in her mind as she stood there, dazed, watching the snake.

But happily for her the old saying, "There's many a slip 'twixt cup and lip," was exemplified in this instance. In drawing up its coils the reptile failed to reckon with a large Egyptian earthenware jar that stood on a box. The tail, moving about like that of a cat or a tiger about

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to spring, lapped round the base of the jar, and down it fell with a crash.

It was an interposition of Providence ; no more, no less. The python was startled, and momentarily ‘put off his stroke.’ And the clatter of the big jar acted on Paddy like a vigorous slap on the back to a sleeper.

Paddy leapt aside and on to a trunk. In that instant the python struck—and its nose drove with great force against the wall.

Hissing furiously, with bleeding mouth and broken frontal teeth, it recoiled.

This gave Paddy time to collect her re-awakened wits. Rapidly she thrust two trunks and a large box in front of her. And, seizing a long-handled straw broom she stood at bay.

But the python had not the courage to make another such thrust. Its slow-moving wits could only realize that the first had resulted in pain and injury.

Five minutes went by. Then ten . . . but to Paddy it seemed an eternity, a trial as by fire, a real taste of hell. Her natural contempt for danger, and the Celtic spirit which no oppression or suffering, mental or physical, could break, stood her in good stead.

THE SERPENT—AND EVE

She knew full well that the python would return to the attack, but she knew not the manner of the return. With every sense alert, she watched and listened. Before long it was all made clear.

Awakening from its temporary torpor, the python became all activity once more. Its coils vibrated ; its tongue moved rapidly in and out ; its lidless, unwinking eyes glared balefully, and prolonged hissing proclaimed that another attack was imminent.

The python was to employ an offensive totally dissimilar to the first, but no less effective. The tail of a python is a marvellous piece of living mechanism. It may, in a sense, be compared to the trunk of an elephant, or the right arm of a powerful athlete, with the added power and flexibility of a gorilla. And now this mighty weapon began to grope, feeling and examining the bases of the trunks that acted as a screen between python and Paddy.

Slowly but steadily it worked its way round the corner of the barricade. . . . Now it was casting about for Paddy's ankle. . . .

Summoning all her strength she fought it off with the broom. Again and again, and many

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times yet again, the tail lashed and groped, with tip crooked and taut. Furiously the python sought to penetrate the guard. No less furiously did Paddy fend it off. . . .

The contest was unequal, for while the python had unlimited reserves of strength, patience, and endurance, Paddy had only sheer pluck and nerve. The contest could not last much longer, and Paddy knew it. . . .

The snake was becoming bolder. Now its great bulk was moving round the bulwark of boxes. With a sudden lash, like that of a rhino whip in the hand of an angry man, the tail struck.

Instinctively Paddy jabbed down her broom in a last desperate effort to save her legs from that deadly menace. The tail closed round its grass base ; in an instant it was jerked from her hands.

Then a more active combat ensued. Paddy warded off and baffled the python again and again by tipping boxes and trunks on to it. Posing one on top of another she overturned them on to the reptile in the vain hope of crippling, or at least intimidating it.

But a python's mentality is slow and crude. It had decided on securing its prey, and nothing short of death or a broken spine would deter it,

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so long as the intended victim was within sight or scent.

Suddenly a new idea flashed into the mind of the hunted lady. With a jerk she threw up the lid of a trunk, and, gathering up an armful of the clothes it contained, she flung them over the python. Its teeth gripped the bundle ; the terrible coils sought, vainly, to constrict the yielding clothes. Soon realizing its mistake, the reptile tried to disentangle itself. But its recurved teeth were hopelessly entangled in the meshes of a silken garment.

Viciously it lashed, coiled, uncoiled, thrust forward, and withdrew its head in desperate endeavour to free its jaws of the clinging material.

Meanwhile Paddy was casting around desperately for some means of escape. As her eyes, roving wildly, sought the walls, she noticed, high up, an aperture about eighteen inches square—a ventilator.

Hope flamed up ; and, seizing the operating cord, she pulled hard. Alas ! it snapped.

Sinking on to a box, Paddy stared stonily at the struggling python, wondering how long it would be before it freed itself from the entangling clothes. Almost worn out with the struggle,

PYTHONS AND THEIR WAYS

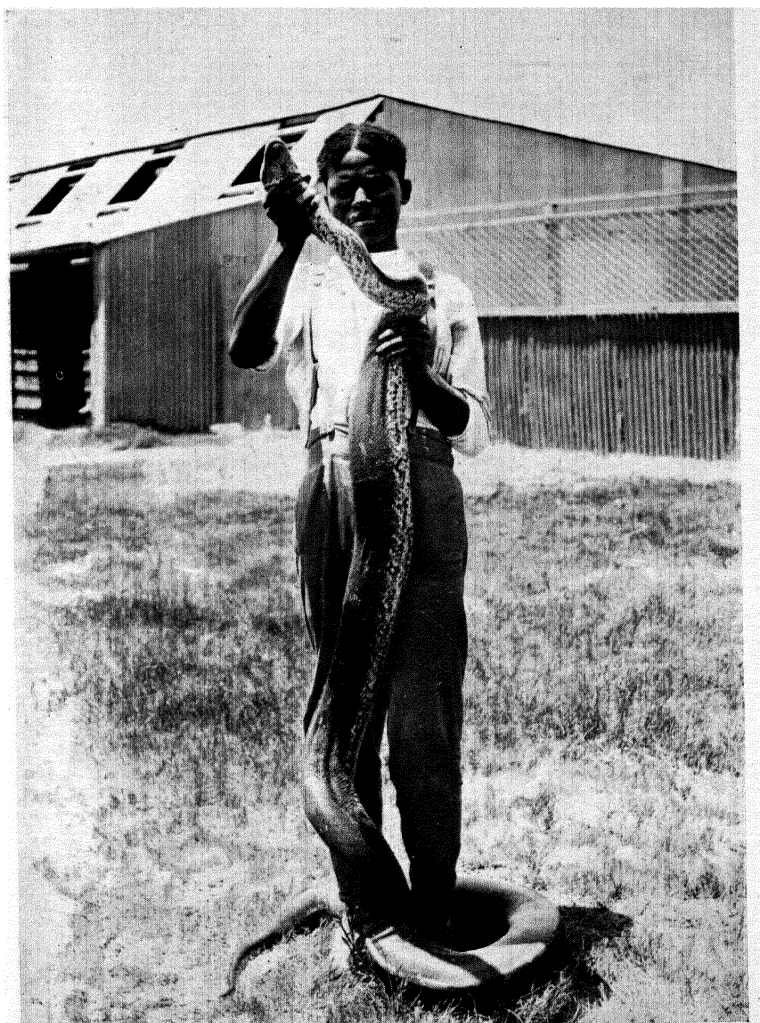
she was on the point of despairing when suddenly a thought flashed like a wireless ray into her brain. Why not make a pile of the boxes, and so reach the ventilator ?

No sooner conceived than done. Feverishly she balanced the boxes one on top of another ; eagerly, but cautiously, she climbed up, secured a footing on the topmost one. Then, jerking open the flap, she thrust her head through the hole and screamed loud and long.

A woman's scream is very penetrating. In the still, warm air of an African summer afternoon especially so. A butcher's boy, delivering meat, heard it. Dropping his basket, he hastened to ascertain the source of the scream. Paddy was beckoning wildly from her aerie. Into the dull brain of the coloured youth came realization that the lady was in some sort of trouble.

He hastened round to the kitchen at the opposite side of the house, and gave the alarm. In a few seconds cook, housemaid, and butcher's boy came pattering along the balcony and stopped before the closed door.

From her elevated perch Paddy shouted instructions to them to open the door. But the cravens outside were too terrified to obey.



HANDLING A PYTHON

After a month's gentle fondling the python which tried to kill Mrs FitzSimons allowed a Zulu native attendant to handle it freely.

THE SERPENT—AND EVE

Coloured folk have an unreasoning horror of snakes, and there was, therefore, some excuse.

But at last, after Paddy had for twenty minutes been parleying, scolding, cajoling, from her perilous position, the butcher's boy thrust the metal rod with the door knob attached to it into its aperture in the lock, jerked open the door, and instantly ran off, with the two women at his heels.

Meanwhile the python had freed itself from the clothing, and Paddy was again fending it off. She countered it by upsetting on to its huge body the pile of boxes she was standing on; and before it could disengage itself and its seventeen feet of muscle, the door flew open, and she staggered out, slamming it behind her. . . .

When I met Paddy at dinner that evening with my two young sons, Vivian and Desmond, we discussed the latest War news, as usual. Presently she observed, in a quiet tone :

“ You were very near being a widower to-day.”

Startled, I asked how, and why, and learned what had transpired.

CHAPTER IX

TUSSLES AT HOME AND ABROAD

ON the morning after Paddy's terrible experience I sent a messenger to the Museum for Inyorka, the Zulu who was then in charge of our collection of live snakes.

He came, with an assistant ; and, armed with a big mealie sack, we wended our way to the python's lair.

Inyorka was six feet tall, with immense muscular development. He had had three years' experience with pythons : to handle them was a daily occurrence with him. I warned him, however, to be careful, and gave him a brief outline of my wife's fearful ordeal. But Inyorka merely grinned, displaying his beautifully strong and even white teeth.

He was unaware of the vitalizing and courage-developing effect on pythons of moist heat and seclusion, or he would not have been so cocksure.

The snake had calmed down. It was lying

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with its coils one above another, in a corner. It seemed to be sulking. Perchance it was chagrined and disgusted at its failure to make a meal of Paddy.

Inyorka was angry with the snake for daring to make an attempt on one whom he had always regarded as a queen. So, with a string of invectives in the flowery Zulu tongue, he stubbed it in the ribs with the toe of his boot.

Immediately he got the shock of his life. The python uncoiled almost as rapidly as a clock-spring when a youngster plays at winding it up and gives it a turn more than its controlling pivot can endure.

In an instant it had the Zulu's ankle in its jaws. But before it could constrict him in the confined space, reinforcements were at hand. Two coils were round Inyorka's leg; I was snatching wildly at the squirming, whirling tail; Ingundana, the other man, sat on the middle of the snake and gripped it with hands and knees.

Then raged a battle royal. Three muscular men against one python—severely handicapped for space in which to put into operation its innumerable constricting muscles, each of which

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was stronger, and a thousand times more flexible, than Damascus steel.

Over and over we rolled and tumbled among the boxes. But at length the python began to react to the stranglehold Inyorka had upon its throat. Quick to notice the weakening, Inyorka put forth all his strength, and unhooked the reptile's jaws from their grip on his ankle. The coils lost their constricting power, and Inyorka was at last able to withdraw his bruised and numb leg.

Suddenly the python gave up struggling, and hissed sullenly. This is the way with pythons. Once thoroughly subdued, they rarely put up a serious fight against their human masters. This is why showmen handle these great reptiles so freely, and apparently so carelessly.

We stuffed it into the mealie sack, sewed up the opening, carried the sackful of snake downstairs, and dumped it into a hand-truck for transport to the Museum.

That python had a remarkable individuality. Determined to show its disapproval of the indignities it had suffered, it now went on hunger-strike.

Pythons have been known to fast for three

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years before dying of starvation. But Inyorka did not mean to allow this one to have such an unpleasant end. He was proud of it, for a Zulu always holds a brave enemy in high esteem. So he asked, as a special favour :

“ *Baas*, can I feed the snake ? ”

“ Yes, Inyorka. Give it ten pounds of nice fresh beef.”

And forcible feeding began. The snake was carried out to a grassy lawn whereon the sun poured its warm rays. There one man held its tail, another bestrode its middle, a third gripped its head and held its jaws open. Inyorka, squatting in front of the snake, took a pound of meat, thrust it gently into the capacious mouth, and, with a smooth round stick about a foot long, pressed the food well down into the reptile's gullet. The second man then caressed and massaged the meat about a yard of the way down the long, red lane to the position where the stomach is located.

This seemed a satisfactory way of overcoming the hunger-strike, and I instructed Inyorka to follow it out at fortnightly intervals.

About six weeks had elapsed when Inyorka came to me and said : “ *Baas*, it is War-time ;

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the face of the land is lean, and our stomachs cry aloud for good food."

"Yes, I know, Inyorka. Do you want a rise in wages?"

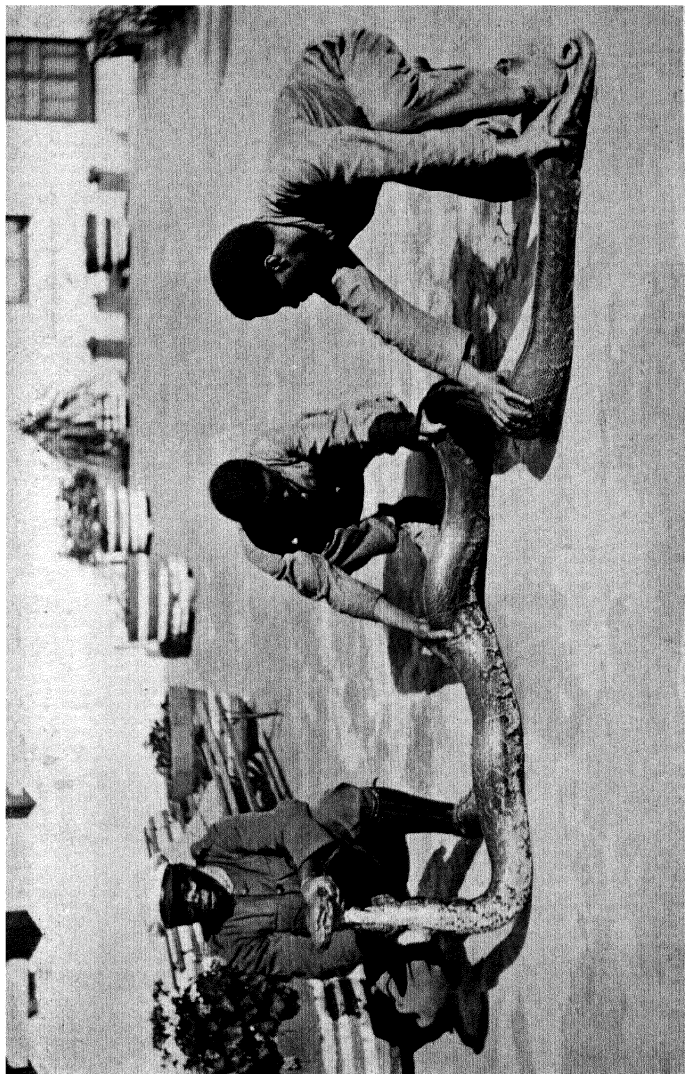
"No, *Baas*. I am content. But my heart reproaches me. It cries aloud and accuses me! I fear that when I depart and join my ancestors they will frown upon me. They will say: 'Inyorka, you wasted the good beef of the ox, the food of warriors, the nourishment which gives courage, fierceness, and strength on the war-path!' The Great Spirit will be angry. He will eat me up."

"Inyorka," said I, "what are you driving at? Do you object to the poor old python having a ration of meat twice in a moon?"

"No, *Baas*, no. But it's this way. Good meat is being wasted. We are feeding worms. Yes, *Baas*, worms! And my stomach and the spirits of my ancestors cry aloud!"

Eventually Inyorka came to the point. The python had got the better of him every time. After the slow and tedious job of forcible feeding, it had rejected the meat, which had to be buried—literally given to the worms.

"Inyorka," said I, "next time you feed the



GETTING READY FOR FORCIBLE FEEDING
The fourth man has gone to fetch the beef.

TUSSLES AT HOME AND ABROAD

python come and tell me. I will cast a spell upon it. The snake will not waste any more good meat ; and you will once more be in truth its master, and there will be no fear of your spirit taking its form when you depart for the other world."

In due course Inyorka announced the event. When the operation was over, I drew from my pocket a linen ambulance bandage, and applied it in the form of a ligature round the python's body above the meat.

"Inyorka, this spell will work. No more good food will be wasted. Your ancestors will be appeased. Take the snake. Put it back into its warm cage. Handle it gently. Treat it kindly, and do not ruffle its temper. At sundown remove the bandage quietly and silently, and all will be well."

The object of the bandage was to prevent the rejection of the food until digestion was well under way, allowing time, also, for the snake to recover from its annoyance at the process of feeding.

We kept that python alive for a long time. Eventually it abandoned its hunger-strike, and ate after the manner of normal pythons. The

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visitors to the Museum and Snake Park flocked to see it, and marvelled at its great bulk and the purple sheen of its smooth scales.

One day it cast its skin, and cast it beautifully. The old skin peeled off, inside out, and was intact even to the transparent eye-scales. This is the only instance on record of a captive python shedding a complete skin without blemish or tear.

AN UNWELCOME VISITOR

Returning at nightfall to our tent in a forest glade after a long day's study of wild-bird life, my companion, a cousin who had recently arrived from Ireland, groped his way into the tent, struck a match, and there, within four feet of him, lay a bulky python on his camp bed, with head poised and tongue flashing and flickering in and out of its jaws.

The sheer unexpectedness of the sight rendered my cousin momentarily incapable of speech or movement. Regaining nervous control, he backed out of the tent and collided violently with me. Long years of camping, tracking the creatures of the wilds, and studying their ways and habits in the hours of daylight and darkness

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develop an alertness of muscle and brain little understood by dwellers in towns.

The resourcefulness of our ancestors of the Stone Age, in their quest for food and in the avoidance of their many enemies, is still lying latent in us, to be awakened on occasion.

So it was but a moment before I was up and facing the unknown danger with gun at the ready. But when it was ascertained that the danger was only a python, all occasion for alarm evaporated.

My cousin was eager to shoot the creature. But why destroy life unnecessarily? Besides, a charge of heavy shot might do much damage to our kit in the tent, and a big python doesn't drop dead even if its heart or head be riddled with shot. It lashes, tumbles, and rolls around for a very considerable time, and we had left our tent neat and natty before departing that morning.

To me the situation presented but one problem—how to dislodge the unwelcome visitor?

It was not a difficult problem, and we retired into the forest, cut a couple of suitable branches, forked them at one end, and, returning to the tent, salved the hurricane lamp and lit it. By its

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feeble and fitful glare the python was evicted and we retired to rest.

A TRAGEDY OF THE WILD

On another occasion my attention was attracted to a Duiker buck in full flight, with Kafir dogs endeavouring to overtake it.

After doubling, twisting, and turning in the endeavour to shake off its pursuers, the buck dived into a wooded kloof, at the top of which I was sitting. Presently the dogs began to yap and bark; and, seemingly, the sound did not recede or draw nearer. Believing the harassed buck had turned at bay and that the dogs were too cowardly to close in and finish their job, I made my way through the tangled undergrowth and rock-strewn ground. The mental picture in my mind of the sight I was about to see was instantly dispelled. Right there before me, in full view, was a python with the hunted buck in its coils; and, with head and a yard of its body raised threateningly, it faced the excited dogs.

The little antelope in its headlong flight had run into a python lying concealed and on the watch for anything good to eat which might pass within striking distance. It was apparent that

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the Duiker had already been fatally crushed, so nothing could be gained by effecting a rescue. In the competition for food, or to escape being converted into food, the creatures of the wild are kept in a condition of mental and physical efficiency. There are no slackers in the lower animal world. When a creature drops below the *AI* standard of efficiency it falls prey to another better fitted to live, or else it becomes incapable of procuring a sufficiency of food and dies miserably.

AN UNPLEASANT SURPRISE

Wandering with a friend over his farm on another day, I followed him into a dry water furrow to avoid the tangled thorny scrub. We had proceeded but a short distance when my friend's foot collided with some soft object, which instantly revealed itself as a python in a most unpleasant way. Like a flash of light its coils were thrown round the man's leg, and he and the python were having a rough-and-tumble struggle in the long grass.

Naturally I came to the rescue at the earliest possible moment, and not much harm had, so far, been done. The snake was gripping the

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man's ankle with its jaws and had thrown a succession of coils up to the top of the thigh. We found it utterly beyond our strength to uncoil the reptile, and so we were reluctantly obliged to cut the poor creature's head off.

The python measured thirteen feet nine inches only, and it had evidently mistaken my friend's leg for some form of legitimate prey.

GAINING EXPERIENCE

My young Irish cousin had the prevailing 'lust to kill' in his blood, and he hadn't been sufficiently long with me in the wild to get it educated out of him.

But he got his lesson, and it was a rather startling one. I was always preaching to him that the creatures of the wild had just as much right as he to be in the world, and that to kill merely for the so-called sport of depriving some inoffensive creature of its life wasn't 'cricket.' But he heeded me not, and one day, taking up his gun, he left camp and vanished into the forest.

One hour later he returned, bruised, crest-fallen, and unnerved, minus gun and cap. His attention had been attracted to the chattering of

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some vervet monkeys in the creeper-covered top of a forest tree.

Gliding silently through the undergrowth to get beneath the tree, he dimly discerned the outline of a bulky body. It was a large python coiled among the branches in the usual circles piled one above another, but this he did not know. He imagined it to be some sort of defenceless wild creature that was at his mercy, so, sliding two cartridges charged with buck-shot into his gun, he 'let fly,' as he termed it, and next moment he was borne to the ground by a weighty mass. The body of the python, still uncoiled, had dropped on to him. Naturally thinking he was in the gravest peril, he freed himself of the slithering body of the giant snake and speedily fled. I hadn't any sympathy for him, but I consented to go forth and retrieve his possessions.

On reaching the scene of the encounter we found the python to be fatally wounded, necessitating a further charge of shot to expedite its exit to the other world.

THE DEVIL ABROAD

In most of the dorps in South Africa the hotel bar-room is the only place where one can

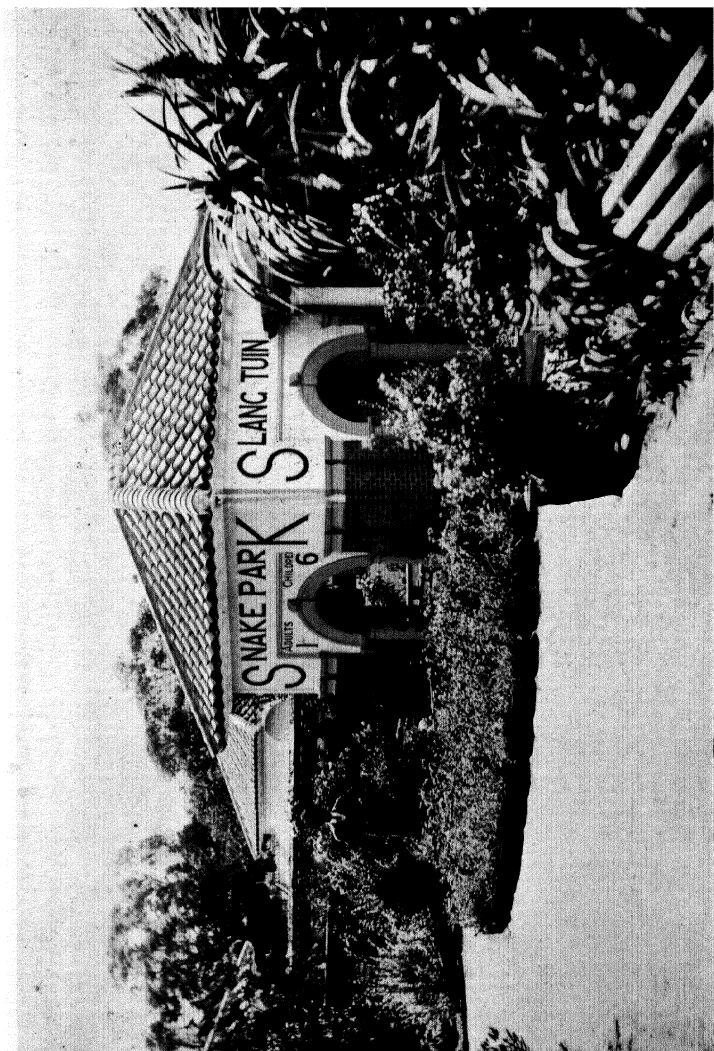
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meet anybody with whom to exchange yarns. Somehow, as soon as strangers learn my name, it instantly conjures up snakes in their minds. "So you're FitzSimons of Port Elizabeth," they exclaim, and forthwith gather around eager to ask questions and to relate snake stories.

I was once sitting in a bar-room on a bright moonlight night listening to a hair-raising snake yarn, when the clattering of the hoofs of a fast-galloping horse startled the company into a concerted movement for the *stoep*.

Reining up, the horseman slid to the ground, and, ignoring our questions, he strode into the bar and demanded brandy. Filling a glass with the strong spirit, he gulped it down. Then the cause of his agitation was revealed. Riding over a tree-flanked road a couple of miles distant from the dorp, he saw an apparition which, in his own words, "froze him stiff." In the bright moonlight, lying on the road, he declared he saw an enormous snake with devil's horns, head, and pointed beard.

Not having led too decent a life, and having listened to the Predicant's weekly denunciations of sinners and his account of the raging, roaring devils on the look-out for them, he naturally



ENTRANCE TO THE SNAKE PARK

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believed what he saw to be Satan himself. And, not being desirous of falling into the fiend's clutches, he turned his horse and fled back to the dorp, where habit brought him unerringly to the hotel bar. I proposed sallying forth to the scene of the incident, but the scared man declared that all the gold of Johannesburg and the diamonds of Kimberley would not induce him to accompany us.

However, after several strong drinks two of the crowd agreed to come with me, and the proprietor kindly had a pair of horses inspanned to a Cape cart. The Hottentot stable-boy volunteered for half a crown to drive us out, but unfortunately he meanwhile learned somewhat of the nature of our mission and vanished into the shadows.

But that incident imported no insuperable difficulty. Anybody in South Africa, other than ordinary town-dwelling folk, could drive a cart and horses in those days ; and, taking the road as directed, we duly arrived at the place indicated, and quickly solved the mystery.

Some Boer goats had been lying on the warm, dusty road, and a python on a quest for food had captured and constricted an old bearded ram and

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swallowed him from the hind quarters, but the broad horns offered an impediment which even the capacious and elastic jaws of the serpent could not negotiate.

CHAPTER X

ANIMAL-WORSHIP IN CENTRAL AFRICA

ERRONEOUSLY the African natives often have been called polytheists (worshippers of more than one god), but in fact, as far as we could study native religions, they are, without a single exception, monotheists, or worshippers of one god.

Generally it is believed that one supreme Being made the world and everything in it, but, after having created it, He gave the management of it to various spirits and ghosts. He, however, still supervises the work done by those spirits.

Spirits are always invisible, as God Himself is, but they have the power to assume any shape imaginable, whether animal-like or tree-like.

In South Sudan, especially by the Dinka, Shilluk, and Bari tribes, who live in the vast swamps of the Bahr el-Ghazal, it is believed that spirits preferably dwell in the bodies of certain

PYTHONS AND THEIR WAYS

animals, such as pythons or crocodiles, but the same animal is not worshipped by more than one tribe.

When we were in the little village of Shambe, near the bank of the Upper Nile, in South Sudan, we learned that a very powerful spirit dwelt in a huge python. The reptile on that account was held sacred, and offerings were given to it—not to please the reptile, but to appease the spirit living in it. Other pythons, however, were killed and eaten by the same tribe (Dinkas), so that pythons in general were not held sacred (as they would have been, say, by the Red Indian tribes of America, who believe in totemism), but only this particular one (fetishism). In another village, Bohr, only about fifty miles distant from Shambe, a giraffe was worshipped, as being the dwelling-place of a spirit, and no respect was paid to any python.

Whatever the animal worshipped, it always will be protected, and cases are known where Europeans, or natives from other parts, not knowing about this form of fetishism, were killed by the infuriated natives on account of their having endangered or not having respected the life of a fetish (sacred animal or tree).

ANIMAL-WORSHIP

One case happened in a village not far away from the place where we had pitched our camp. An Englishman, who had been hunting, shot a huge python, not knowing, of course, that the reptile was held sacred in that locality. When the natives heard of the 'murder' they took up their weapons and attacked the camp of the unfortunate Englishman. He managed to escape, but not before the natives had severely wounded him.

These sacred animals enjoy the utmost respect, and especially when any calamity befalls the natives, such as disease, starvation, drought, etc. Their witch-doctors give offerings to the fetish, and if the latter happens to be a crocodile, often human beings are sacrificed and thrown into the water, where the 'host of the spirit' will lie waiting to devour the unlucky victim.

APPENDIX

PYTHONS AND BOAS

PYTHONS and their cousins the boas belong to the group of giant non-venomous snakes which still retain vestiges in their bodies of bones which in their remote ancestors were legs.

The typical pythons, which are represented by about nine species, inhabit Tropical and Southern Africa, South-eastern Asia, and Australasia.

The Malay Python (*Python reticulatus*) inhabits Burma and Indo-China and the Malay Peninsula and Archipelago. It is the largest of all the typical pythons, attaining a length of thirty feet. These reptiles often inhabit old buildings, and issue forth at night in search of prey.

The Australian Diamond Snake or Carpet Snake (*Python spilotes*) inhabits Australia and New Guinea. It is of comparatively small size, attaining a total length of about seven feet.

The Amethystine Python (*Python amethystinus*) grows to a length of eleven feet, and it inhabits the Moluccas, Timor, New Guinea, New Ireland, New Britain, and Northern Queensland.

The Timor Python (*Python timorensis*) inhabits Timor and Flores.

Next comes the well-known Indian Python (*Python molurus*). It is an inhabitant of India and Ceylon, Southern China, Malay Peninsula, and Java. Although stated by some to attain a length of thirty feet, it does not usually exceed twelve feet in length.

The Sumatran Python (*Python curtus*) of the Malay Peninsula, Sumatra, and Borneo is easily recognizable from the others by the large amount of red in the skin colour.

The Rock Python (*Python sebae*) inhabits Tropical and South

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Africa, while its near relation, the Royal Python (*Python regius*), is confined to West Africa.

There are a good many species of pythons grouped under other genera owing to anatomical differences between them and the typical python. The only one of these which inhabits Africa is the West African Python (*Calabaria reinhardti*), which is an inhabitant of West Africa, from Liberia to the Congo.

The boas and tree boas or boa constrictors are also snakes of the giant breed. They are separated into various genera and species. The differences between the pythons and boas are mostly of an anatomical nature. The outstanding difference is that the true or typical pythons have a supraorbital bone forming the upper border of the socket of the eye. In the boas this is absent.

Chief among the boa constrictors is the Anaconda (*Eunectes murinus*). The Anaconda inhabits the tropical parts of the Guianas, Brazil, and North-eastern Peru. There is much controversy as to the length attained by this giant snake. The greatest length officially recorded is thirty feet, but it is commonly believed to grow to about thirty-five feet.

SYNOPSIS OF THE SUB-FAMILIES AND GENERA OF THE FAMILY BOIDÆ (PYTHONS AND BOAS)¹

ORDER OPHIDIA

PYTHONS

I. SUB-FAMILY PYTHONINÆ

KEY TO GENERA

This sub-family is distinguished from the boas by having

- (1) The supraorbital bone present.
- (2) The premaxillary bone toothed.
- (3) The subcaudals mostly in two rows.
- (4) The tail only slightly prehensile—sometimes not at all.

¹ In the compilation of the Synopsis the British Museum Catalogue of Snakes (vol. i) has been freely consulted.

APPENDIX

GENUS 1, LOXOCEMUS

No labial pits. Nostril lateral, in a single nasal. No loreal.

GENUS 2, NARDOA

Lower labials with pits. Nostrils lateral, between two nasals.

GENUS 3, LIASIS

Lower labials with pits. Nostril supero-lateral, in a semidivided nasal.

GENUS 4, PYTHON

Tail prehensile. Rostral and anterior upper labials deeply pitted.

GENUS 5, CHONDROPYTHON

Premaxillary bone toothless. Palate toothed. Labials pitted. Tail prehensile, with two rows of subcaudals.

GENUS 6, ASPIDITES

Palate toothed. No labial pits. Tail not, or but slightly, prehensile, with the subcaudals mostly single.

GENUS 7, CALABARIA

Palate toothless. No labial pits. No mental groove. Tail not prehensile. Subcaudals single.

BOAS

II. SUB-FAMILY BOINÆ

KEY TO GENERA

This sub-family is distinguished from the pythons by having

- (1) No supraorbital bone.
- (2) No premaxillary teeth.
- (3) The subcaudals mostly single.
- (4) The head distinct from the neck.
- (5) The tail more or less prehensile.
- (6) The anterior teeth very strongly enlarged.

GENUS 1, EPICRATES

Scales smooth. Head with shields. Labials without or with shallow pits.

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GENUS 2, CORALLUS

Scales smooth. Labials with deep pits.

GENUS 3, ENYGRUS

Scales keeled. No labial pits.

GENUS 4, TRACHYBOA

Maxillary and mandibular teeth gradually decreasing in size. No enlarged rostral shield. Scales strongly keeled.

GENUS 5, UNGALIA

An enlarged rostral shield. Scales moderate, in twenty-one to twenty-nine rows. One or two pairs of prefrontal shields.

GENUS 6, UNGALIOPHIS

A large azygous prefrontal shield.

GENUS 7, EUNECTES

Scales very small. Scales smooth. Nasals in contact behind the rostral.

GENUS 8, BOA

Scales smooth. Nasals separated by small scales. Tail short.

GENUS 9, CASAREA

Anterior, maxillary, and mandibular teeth much longer than the posterior. Head very small, distinct from neck. Snout covered with shields. Eye small, with vertical pupil. Scales very small, keeled. Tail long, prehensile.

GENUS 10, BOLIERIA

Anterior, maxillary, and mandibular teeth only a little longer than the posterior. Head small, not distinct from neck. Tail feebly prehensile. Body cylindrical.

GENUS 11, ERYX

Tail very short. Eye very small. Anterior, maxillary, and mandibular teeth longer than the posterior. Head covered with small scales.

GENUS 12, LICHANURA

Head not distinct from neck. Rostral moderate. Nostril between two nasals. Scales small, smooth. Tail short, thick, obtuse at the end. Subcaudals single.

APPENDIX

GENUS 13, CHARINA

Anterior, maxillary, and mandibular teeth longest, gradually decreasing in size. Head not distinct from neck. Rostral large. Nostril between two nasals. Tail short and thick, rounded at the end, not prehensile.

PYTHONS

I. SUB-FAMILY PYTHONINÆ

KEY TO SPECIES

Supraorbital bone present.

GENUS 1, LOXOCEMUS

MEXICAN PYTHON (*Loxocemus bicolor*)

Snout very prominent. Reddish or purplish brown above; uniform, or with scattered small yellowish spots; uniform yellowish white beneath.

Distribution: Southern Mexico.

GENUS 2, NARDOA

NEW IRELAND BOA (*Nardoa boa*)

Brown with black rings, or nearly uniform blackish brown; head black, with a light spot behind eye; young specimens have black and orange rings. Average total length, about six feet.

Distribution: New Ireland.

GENUS 3, LIASIS

NORTH AUSTRALIAN PYTHON (*Liasis childreni*)

Brown above, with more or less distinct larger and darker spots disposed in five or six longitudinal series; a dark streak on either side of the head, passing through the eye; lips yellowish, spotted with brown; lower part uniform yellowish. Average total length, six to seven feet.

Distribution: North Australia.

NEW GUINEA PYTHON (*Liasis fuscus*)

Uniform brown above; yellowish beneath.

Distribution: New Guinea and North Australia.

PYTHONS AND THEIR WAYS

OLIVE BROWN PYTHON (*Liasis olivaceus*)

Uniform olive brown above ; yellowish beneath.

Distribution : North Australia.

SPOTTED PYTHON (*Liasis mackloti*)

Sooty brown above, with scattered small yellowish spots ; belly yellowish or brownish.

Distribution : Timor and Samoa.

PURPLE BROWN PYTHON (*Liasis albertisii*)

Purplish brown above ; head blackish ; labials yellowish, with blackish vertical bars ; uniform yellowish beneath.

Distribution : Western New Guinea and Serwatty Islands.

PAPUAN PYTHON (*Liasis papuanus*)

Olive brown above, each scale blackish at the base ; yellowish beneath.

Distribution : New Guinea.

GENUS 4, PYTHON

AUSTRALIAN DIAMOND SNAKE (*Python spilotes*)

Coloration very variable.

A. Black above, each scale with a yellowish dot, with or without scattered yellow, black-edged spots ; upper labials black-edged ; lower parts yellow, the posterior ventral and subcaudals spotted or edged with black.

B. Pale olive yellow above, each scale edged with black, with yellowish, black-edged spots and cross-bars ; or with three yellowish stripes, the middle one partly broken up into spots ; upper labials black-edged ; lower parts pale yellow, the posterior ventrals and the subcaudals spotted or edged with black.

Average total length, seven feet.

Distribution : Australia and New Guinea.

AMETHYSTINE PYTHON (*Python amethystinus*)

A. Yellowish, or purplish brown above ; uniform, or with darker or lighter markings ; uniform yellowish beneath.

B. Uniform dark brown above, or with very indistinct darker or lighter markings.

C. Pale brown, with darker X-shaped markings on the back and two stripes along the sides.

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D. Dark purplish brown above, with whitish spots or irregular cross-bars, black-edged spots, and cross-bars.

Average total length, eight feet.

Distribution : Moluccas, Timor, New Guinea, New Ireland, New Britain, and North Queensland.

TIMOR PYTHON (*Python timorensis*)

Purplish brown above, with a network of patches of darker scales distributed among others of a lighter colour; a dark line along the middle of the back of the head. Average total length, ten feet.

Distribution : Timor and Flores.

MALAY PYTHON (*Python reticulatus*)

Light yellowish, or brown, above, with large circular rhomboidal or X-shaped markings; young with three longitudinal series of light, black-edged spots; a black line along the middle of the head from the end of the snout to the nape, and another on either side from behind the eye to the angle of the mouth; lower parts yellowish, with small brown spots on the sides, or nearly entirely brown. Attains a length of thirty feet.

Distribution : Burma, Indo-China, Malay Peninsula and Archipelago.

SOUTH AFRICAN OR ROCK PYTHON (*Python sebae*)

Pale brown above, with irregular darker blotches which are black-edged. Sides with dark spots and finely dotted with black. A dark triangular blotch on the head. A dark stripe on each side of the head and a dark subtriangular blotch below the eye. Upper surface of tail with a light stripe between two black ones. Belly dotted and spotted with dark brown.

INDIAN PYTHON (*Python molurus*)

Greyish brown, or yellowish, above, with a dorsal series of large, elongate, subquadrangular, reddish-brown, black-edged spots; on either side a series of smaller spots with light centres; lance-shaped marking on head and nape; a lateral brown stripe passing through the eye, and a brown vertical bar below the eye; lower parts yellowish; sides brown-spotted. Average total length, twelve feet.

Distribution : India, Ceylon, Southern China, Malay Peninsula, Java.

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ANCHIETA'S PYTHON (*Python anchietae*)

A large triangular reddish-brown blotch covers the greater part of the upper surface of the head, and is bordered by a white, black-edged band; it bears, in the middle, behind the level of the eyes, a round white, black-edged spot; back and sides reddish pale brown, with black-edged white spots and bands, the bands circumscribing large areas of the ground colour, the centres of which are occupied by the spots; beneath yellowish, with a few irregular brown spots on the sides. Average total length, ten feet.

Distribution : Benguela, South-West Africa.

ROYAL PYTHON (*Python regius*)

Upper surface of head dark brown, with a pale, black-edged streak on either side, beginning above the nostril and passing through the eye; a dark brown, black-edged band occupies the back, sending down triangular or Y-shaped processes on the sides, which are pale brown; this dorsal band encloses a light streak on the neck, another on the tail, and a series of from ten to eighteen light round or oval spots; belly yellowish, with or without small brown spots on the sides. Average total length, ten to twelve feet.

Distribution : Senegambia and Sierra Leone.

SUMATRAN PYTHON (*Python curtus*)

Brown or brick red above, with a dorsal series of round pale spots, which may be confluent into a stripe on the posterior part of the back; a black line along the middle of the head, followed by elongate, whitish, black-edged spots or undulous bands; sides of head dark, with an oblique light streak from behind the eye to the angle of the mouth; lower parts whitish, uniform, or spotted with brown. Average total length, seven feet.

Distribution : Malay Peninsula, Sumatra, Borneo.

GENUS 5, CHONDROPYTHON

GREEN PYTHON (*Chondropython viridis*)

Bright green above, uniform; or with a series of small yellowish spots along the back; or brick red, with bluish, black-edged spots; young pinkish or yellowish, with purplish or reddish-brown markings; lower parts yellowish white. Average total length, seven feet.

Distribution : New Guinea.

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GENUS 6, ASPIDITES

BLACK-HEADED PYTHON (*Aspidites melanocephalus*)

Light brown above, with darker cross-bars ; yellowish beneath ; head and neck jet-black above and below. Average total length, seven feet.

Distribution : North Australia.

RAMSAY'S PYTHON (*Aspidites ramsayi*)

Greyish brown above, variegated with indistinct darker brown bands and spots over the entire upper surface from the head to the tail ; ventrals yellowish, the basal portion of each shield dusky. Average total length, seven feet.

Distribution : Port Bourke.

GENUS 7, CALABARIA

WEST AFRICAN PYTHON (*Calabaria reinhardtii*)

Reddish or purplish brown above, with more or less numerous irregular, scattered yellowish spots. Average total length, five feet.

Distribution : West Africa, from Liberia to the Congo.

BOAS

II. SUB-FAMILY BOINÆ

KEY TO SPECIES

No supraorbital bone.

GENUS 1, EPICRATES (*Tree Boas*)

THICK-NECKED TREE BOA (*Epicrates cenchris*)

A. Pale brown above, uniform, or elegantly marked with rings and spots.

B. Five dark brown longitudinal lines on the head ; back with a series of dark brown or black rings ; sides with dark spots, or black and white *ocelli*, or one or two dark brown stripes.

C. Markings very indistinct or absent.

Average total length, six feet.

Distribution : tropical America, from coast of Costa Rica to Northern Peru and Northern Brazil.

PALE-HEADED TREE BOA (*Epicrates angulifer*)

Pale brown above, with dorsal series of rhomboidal dark spots, and dark brown reticulated lines on the sides ; a lateral series of

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dark brown *ocelli* with yellowish centres ; yellowish beneath. Average total length, eight feet.

Distribution : Cuba.

STREAKED TREE BOA (*Epicrates striatus*)

Pale brown above, with dark olive-brown spots separated by narrow inter-spaces, or brown with yellowish undulous or zigzag cross-bands, which may be edged with blackish ; usually a darkish streak on either side of head behind eye ; lower parts yellowish or pale olive, spotted black or brown. Average total length, five feet.

Distribution: Santo Domingo, New Providence Island, Bahamas.

YELLOW-HEADED BOA (*Epicrates inornatus*)

Yellow or pale olive anteriorly, frequently blackish posteriorly ; spots or cross-bars on body ; sometimes a pair of dark streaks along neck ; an ill-defined dark streak may be present behind eye. Average total length, five feet.

Distribution : Jamaica, Santo Domingo, Porto Rico.

FORD'S BOA (*Epicrates fardii*)

Pale yellowish, olive, or reddish above ; with dorsal series of large, elliptic or reniform transverse dark brown spots edged blackish, some possibly confluent to form undulous band ; lateral series of smaller spots ; dark stripe either side of head, passing through eye ; belly yellowish, with small brown spots. Average total length, five feet.

Distribution : Santo Domingo, Turk's Island, Bahamas.

Epicrates gracilis

Blackish grey, lighter on belly ; six longitudinal series of small black spots. Average total length, five feet.

Distribution : Santo Domingo.

GENUS 2, CORALLUS

COOK'S BOA (*Corallus cookii*)

Coloration very variable.

A. Pale yellowish or greyish brown above, with two parallel or alternating series of large rhomboidal dark brown spots descending to sides, and which may enclose yellowish *ocelli* ; upper surface of head with dark brown spots or marblings, and two dark streaks either side behind eye ; lower parts yellowish, spotted brown.

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B. Blackish brown above, alternating with yellowish lines (borders of markings of typical form); belly blackish brown.

C. Yellowish brown above; uniform, or with more traces of dark markings; belly yellow, without spots.

D. Olive brown above, some scales yellow, forming festooned lines (borders of markings of typical form), all scales edged black, black predominating on tail; head with mere tracings of dark markings; belly yellow, with few black spots.

Average total length, five and a half feet.

Distribution: Colombia, Venezuela, British Guiana, Trinidad, and Windward Islands of West Indies.

TYPICAL TREE BOA (*Corallus hortulanus*)

Brown or pale grey brown above, with two alternating series of large, more or less distinct, dark brown rhomboidal or roundish spots, occasionally streaked yellowish; head usually pale brown, with dark brown streaks edged yellowish—viz., a curved one on snout, from eye to eye, another on middle of back of head, two either side, behind eye; head sometimes dark brown, with yellow lines and marblings; lower parts yellowish, more or less profusely spotted brown. Average total length, six feet.

Distribution: Guianas, Northern Brazil, Ecuador, Northern Peru.

DOG-HEADED TREE BOA (*Corallus caninus*)

Adult bright green above, with white spots and cross-bars; yellow inferiorly; young yellowish, with white markings edged dark green or purplish black. Average total length, five feet.

Distribution: Guianas, Brazil.

COSTA RICA BOA (*Corallus annulatus*)

Ash-coloured, with darker oval figures either side; head and lower surfaces uniform. Average total length, five feet.

Distribution: Costa Rica.

MALAGASY TREE BOA (*Corallus madagascariensis*)

Brown or olive above, with two longitudinal series of large roundish or rhomboidal dark brown spots, with yellow centre and border; oblique dark brown streak either side of eye to angle of mouth; lower parts yellow, uniform, or with small brown spots. Average total length, five feet.

Distribution: Madagascar.

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GENUS 3, ENYGRUS

KEELED TREE BOAS (*Enygrus australis*)

A. Brown, olive, or reddish above, with series of large dorsal spots, possibly confluent into a zigzag band; series of large light spots may be present along each side of body; dark streak each side of head, passing through eye, and a cross-bar from eye to eye; belly spotted brown or black.

B. Pale reddish brown above, with dark brown vertebral stripe edged yellow; uniform yellow beneath.

Average total length, four feet.

Distribution: New Britain, Solomon Islands, New Hebrides, Loyalty Islands, Samoa.

Enygrus bibronii

Olive, greenish, or greyish above, with brown, reddish, or black spots, possibly confluent into longitudinal bands on neck; or reddish brown with black and yellow spots; a dark stripe either side of head behind eye; tail with large, dark, black-edged spots separated by narrow yellow inter-spaces; lower parts yellowish, uniform, or spotted or marbled with black; usually a black line or series of small spots running along outer border of ventrals on anterior part of body. Average total length, four feet.

Distribution: San Christoval, Fiji, Tonga Islands.

NEW GUINEA BOA (*Enygrus carinatus*)

Coloration very variable.

A. Yellowish or pale brown above, with dark brown markings, some or all confluent into stripes; loreal and temporal regions dark brown, with few yellowish spots; belly yellowish, powdered brown in middle, with elongate dark brown blotches, or a stripe either side.

B. Yellowish or brown above, with rhomboidal dark brown or blackish spots, or with dark zigzag dorsal band; a dark streak either side of head, passing through eye; belly dotted or spotted black.

C. Yellowish or pale reddish brown above; uniform or with small darker spots.

Average total length, four feet.

Distribution: Pelew Islands, Moluccas, Timor Laut, New Guinea, New Ireland, New Britain, Solomon Islands.

DWARF BOA (*Enygrus asper*)

Reddish brown above, with dorsal series of large, dark brown, black-edged spots, possibly confluent into zigzag band; yellowish

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beneath, uniform, or with dark brown spot. Average total length, four feet.

Distribution : Misol, Salawatty, New Guinea, and Duke of York Island.

GENUS 4, TRACHYBOA

Trachyboa gularis

Brown above, darker on top of head and middle of nape ; two alternating series of dark spots either side, lower largest and extending on belly, which is yellowish. Average total length, three feet.

Distribution : Guayaquil, Brazil.

GENUS 5, UNGALIA

There are eight species in this genus. All are of small size. They inhabit the West Indies—Bahamas, Cuba, Santo Domingo, Jamaica—also Guatemala, Ecuador, Peru. They are (1) *Ungalia taczanowskyi*; (2) *Ungalia moreletii*; (3) *Ungalia melanura*; (4) *Ungalia maculata*; (5) *Ungalia pardalis*; (6) *Ungalia semicincta*; (7) *Ungalia conjuncta*; (8) *Ungalia cana*.

GENUS 6, UNGALIOPHIS

There is only one species in this genus—viz., *Ungaliophis continentalis*. It grows to a length of about six feet, and its habitat is North-western Guatemala.

GENUS 7, EUNECTES

ANACONDA (*Eunectes murinus*)

Greyish brown or olive above, with single series or two alternating series of large, blackish transverse spots and one or two lateral series of blackish *ocelli* with white centres ; top of head dark, separated from paler sides by dark streak forming point on snout ; an oblique black streak either side of head, behind eye ; lower parts whitish, spotted black. Average total length, fifteen feet ; attains length of thirty feet.

Distribution : Guianas, Brazil, North-east Peru.

GENUS 8, BOA

BOA CONSTRICTOR (*Boa constrictor*)

Pale brown, with 15 to 20 dark brown cross-bars, widening on each side and connected by a dark dorso-lateral streak enclosing large, elongate, oval or elliptical spots of the pale ground colour ; a light longitudinal line in outer or widened portion of dark

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cross-bars ; on each side a series of large dark brown spots with light centres, mostly alternating with dorsal bars ; on the tail the markings become much larger, brick red, edged with black, and separated by narrow yellowish inter-spaces ; head with a dark brown median line extending from between nostrils to nape, widening behind, sometimes loop-shaped ; a crescentic blackish marking on rostral ; a dark brown streak either side of head, passing through eye, and sending down a process between end of snout and eye ; a dark brown bar below eye and two on each side of lower lip ; belly yellowish, dotted, or dotted and spotted with black. Average total length, ten feet ; attains twelve feet.

Distribution : South America, from Venezuela to Buenos Ayres.

ARGENTINE BOA (*Boa occidentalis*)

Dark brown above, with yellowish markings, mostly in form of rings and small spots ; head brown, with markings as in *Boa constrictor*, but less distinct, and bordered with yellow ; lower parts yellowish, dotted, and marbled with brown. Average total length, eight feet.

Distribution : Argentine republic (provinces Mendoza, San Juan, and Cordoba).

TRINIDAD BOA (*Boa diviniroqua*)

Brown or olive above, with 25 to 30 darker spots or cross-bands on body, and lateral series of spots and vertical bars with light centres ; head markings as in *Boa constrictor*, but sometimes rather indistinct ; longitudinal line on head broader, often interrupted or scalloped ; tail black and yellow, spotted and dotted black or olive, sometimes entirely blackish. Average total length, nine feet.

Distribution : Dominica, St Lucia, Trinidad.

COLOMBIA BOA (*Boa imperator*)

Coloration as in *Boa constrictor*, but no red on tail and dorsal cross-bars more numerous—viz., 22 to 30 on body ; dark line in middle of head usually with a process either side between eye, thus forming cross. Average total length, ten feet.

Distribution : Mexico to Western South America (Colombia to Peru).

MEXICAN BOA (*Boa mexicana*)

Closely allied to *Boa imperator*, but with only 55 scales across body ; markings as in that species, but no dark line along middle of head. Average total length, nine feet.

Distribution : Mexico.

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DUMERIL'S BOA (*Boa dumerilii*)

Pale grey brown above, with two longitudinal series of elongate black spots emitting a transverse process above, a hoop-shaped figure below ; these markings may be disposed regularly in pairs and unite by their transverse processes or alternately ; two or three black streaks either side behind eyes, lower continued in front of eye to nostril ; a black cross-line or ring on forehead between eyes ; lower parts whitish, uniform, or spotted brown. Average total length, eight feet.

Distribution : Madagascar.

MALAGASY BOA (*Boa madagascariensis*)

Pale brown above, with elongate, dark brown, black-edged spots ; a vertebral series of large spots which may, at intervals, run into a band ; below it a series of dark rings or *ocelli* with light centres ; a dark streak either side of head, running through eye ; lips with large black spots ; lower parts yellowish white with small blackish spots. Average total length, six feet.

Distribution : Madagascar.

GENUS 9, CASAREA

KEEL-SCALED BOA (*Casarea dussumieri*)

Pale brown above, uniform, or with two dark stripes and a lateral series of small dark spots ; a dark streak either side of head, passing through eye ; belly yellowish, uniform, or with small black spots ; lower surface of tail with large black spots. Average total length, four feet.

Distribution : Round Island, near Mauritius.

GENUS 10, BOLIERIA

There is one species under this genus—viz., *Bolieria multicarinata*. Its average total length is three feet, and its habitat is Round Island, near Mauritius.

There are three more genera of snakes grouped under the same family as the pythons and boas because of some anatomical similarities. They are termed sand snakes. They are (1) *Eryx* ; (2) *Lichanura* ; (3) *Charina*.

The species are all of small size.

